WILL BANGLADESH TURN INTO A SECOND TALIBAN?

KRITIKA PANDEY

Concerns that Bangladesh is increasingly mirroring the situation in Afghanistan are proving to be disturbingly accurate. The country, which has long prided itself on its secular foundations and cultural diversity, is now witnessing a troubling rise in radical Islamist activities that threaten its social fabric. In addition to the persistent assaults on minorities, predominantly Hindus, radical Islamists in this economically struggling nation are also targeting Muslims to compel adherence to stringent Sharia laws.

This alarming trend is occurring against the backdrop of a significant balance of payments crisis, which has left many citizens vulnerable and disillusioned. In recent weeks, radical Islamists have launched a series of attacks on Muslim women in urban centres like Dhaka and Cox's Bazar, as well as in various other regions. These assaults are often justified by the extremists on the grounds of enforcing their interpretation of Islamic norms. Women have been targeted for appearing in public without a male relative, for dressing in what these radicals deem 'indecent' attire, and even for engaging in activities such as listening to music, which they consider sinful.

Such acts of violence not only instil fear among women but also serve as a chilling reminder of the oppressive measures that can arise in societies where extremist ideologies gain traction. Moreover, these extremists have taken their campaign of intimidation further by assaulting and destroying religious shrines, such as Mazars, which hold cultural and spiritual significance for many. They have invaded Muslim religious institutions, issuing warnings to clerics and congregants against playing music, including Sufi devotional songs that have long been a part of the region's rich spiritual heritage.

The Islamists are also advocating for men to grow beards and comply with a strict and regressive sharia code, echoing the demands imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. This push for a rigid interpretation of Islam threatens to undermine the pluralistic values that have historically characterized Bangladeshi society. Alarmingly, the response from authorities—both police and military—has been largely passive, with many incidents of extremist violence going unaddressed. This inaction raises concerns about the potential complicity or tacit support for these radical elements among certain segments of the Bangladeshi population.

The allure of radical Islam has begun to attract new followers among the educated elite, with an increasing number of professionals—including doctors, engineers, lawyers, and university faculty and students—endorsing sharia law. This shift is particularly troubling as it indicates a growing acceptance of extremist ideologies within the very institutions that should be promoting tolerance and coexistence.

In addition to mainstream politicians, there exists a growing faction of advocates who are pushing for the implementation of sharia law, advocating for stronger ties with Pakistan, and promoting a prohibition on idol worship. This group also seeks to impose limitations on the rights of religious minorities and to elevate the status of Urdu and Arabic within the cultural and educational landscape of Bangladesh. A particularly alarming incident recently unfolded at Dhaka University, where students attempted to organize a mass marriage event aimed at pairing Hindu girls with Muslim men.

Reports emerged suggesting that several Hindu girls were allegedly coerced into these marriages, many of whom were being paired with Muslim men who were either their peers or former students at the university. This initiative ignited a wave of outrage across social media platforms, prompting numerous complaints and strong condemnations from prominent figures in society. The backlash was significant enough to compel the university administration to ultimately cancel the event. However, it is noteworthy that no disciplinary actions were taken against the organizers of this controversial event, raising concerns about accountability and the protection of minority rights within the institution.

The radicalization of students at Dhaka University, which is recognized as Bangladesh's premier institution of higher education, as well as at the Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology, has become increasingly evident. This is exemplified by the alarming display of Islamic State flags outside various departments within these educational institutions, signalling a troubling trend of extremist ideologies gaining traction among the student body. Moreover, the ongoing assaults on minority communities in Bangladesh have persisted without interruption, creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity.

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and 69 places of worship—including temples, monasteries, and churches—were subjected to attacks, looting, or outright destruction. The report also details harrowing incidents, including the rape of four women, the vandalism and arson of 915 homes belonging to minority communities, the looting and burning of 953 businesses owned by minorities, and the forcible seizure of land belonging to 21 Hindu families. These violent acts occurred over a distressing 17-day period from August 4 to August 20, highlighting the urgent need for intervention and protection of vulnerable communities in the face of escalating violence and discrimination. The combination of these factors paints a troubling picture of the current socio-political climate in Bangladesh, where the rights and safety of religious minorities are increasingly under threat, and where radical ideologies appear to be gaining ground among the youth of Bangladesh.

Since August 20, a troubling pattern of assaults on Hindus and other minority groups in Bangladesh has continued without any signs of abating. A series of distressing videos have emerged, showcasing the abduction of Hindu women who are being forcibly coerced into converting to Islam, only to be subsequently married off to Muslim men against their will. This alarming trend is not isolated; there have been numerous reports detailing violent attacks on properties and businesses owned by Hindus. Furthermore, Hindu educators and government employees are facing immense pressure from Muslim mobs, leading many to resign from their positions in fear for their safety and well-being. The situation for minorities in Bangladesh is increasingly dire.

The abduction of Hindu girls is a persistent issue, with reports indicating that entire families are being forcibly converted to Islam. In addition, properties owned by Hindus are being unlawfully seized, often with little to no intervention from local authorities. The lack of action to address these grave injustices has allowed anti-Hindu sentiments to escalate, creating an environment of fear and insecurity for minority communities. The most recent wave of violence has specifically targeted the Chakma community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a region that has long been coveted by the Muslim population. Over the years, successive governments have facilitated the settlement of Muslims in the CHT, which has resulted in the indigenous Chakmas being reduced to a minority status within their homeland.

On the afternoon of September 19, a coordinated attack was launched by Muslims, reportedly with the backing of the military, against Chakma homes, businesses, and properties in the Khagrachari district of CHT. These assaults are ongoing, as confirmed by the latest reports.

The violence erupted following the Chakmas' resistance to illegal eviction notices that had been issued by Islamist groups. Despite the military being granted magisterial powers earlier in the week to address such mob violence, they not only failed to assist the beleaguered Chakmas but also appeared to actively participate in the assaults against them. This troubling development raises serious concerns about the protection of minor-

ity rights in Bangladesh and the complicity of state forces in the ongoing violence. The plight of the Chakma community, along with other minority groups, underscores the urgent need for intervention and support from both national and international bodies to safeguard their rights and ensure their safety. The lack of a robust response from both the Bangladeshi government and the international community could embolden extremist groups, leading to further violence and persecution.

This situation not only threatens the social fabric of Bangladesh but also poses a risk of spillover effects into neighbouring countries, potentially destabilizing the entire South Asian region. The silence of intellectuals and civil society in Bangladesh is particularly alarming. Their failure to vocally oppose the rising tide of violence against minorities suggests a troubling complicity or resignation to the status quo. This silence can be interpreted as an endorsement of the government's policies, which only serves to further marginalize already vulnerable communities. The absence of a strong civil society response creates a vacuum that radical elements can exploit, leading to an environment where intolerance and extremism can flourish unchecked.

Moreover, Yunus' appointments of individuals with ties to radical Islamist groups to key positions of power signal a troubling shift in governance. By placing pro-Jamaat-e-Islami figures in influential roles, Yunus is not only legitimizing these groups but also undermining the very institutions that are meant to uphold justice and protect the rights of all citizens. The Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal, which was established to address past atrocities, risks losing its credibility and effectiveness under such leadership.

The release of imprisoned Islamists and the lifting of restrictions on their fundraising activities further exacerbate the situation. These actions not only embolden radical factions but also send a clear message that the government is willing to overlook past crimes in favour of political expediency. This approach undermines the rule of law and sets a dangerous precedent for future governance.

As Yunus prepares for his visit to the United States and the United Nations General Assembly, Western leaders must recognize the gravity of the situation in Bangladesh. They must leverage their diplomatic influence to hold Yunus accountable for his actions and policies. This includes demanding a clear commitment to protecting minority rights, curbing the influence of radical Islamists, and fostering an inclusive society that respects the diversity of its population.

The international community has a responsibility to advocate for human rights and democratic values, and this extends to Bangladesh. Failure to act decisively could result in a further entrenchment of extremist ideologies, leading to a more polarized and violent society. The stakes are high, and the time for action is now. The future of Bangladesh's minorities, the stability of the region, and the integrity of democratic principles all hang in the balance.

ONE NATION–ONE POLL: SOON ENOUGH

SRINIVASAN K. RANGACHARY

The proposal for a 'one-nation-one-poll' system is gaining momentum as it moves towards parliamentary and public discourse, following the Modi government's recent decision to prioritize this issue. The cabinet has officially resolved to introduce a bill in the upcoming parliamentary session, signalling a serious commitment to this electoral reform. Although the concept of simultaneous elections has been a recurring topic in Indian political discussions over the years, a broad political consensus has yet to be established.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been a longstanding advocate for reforms in the electoral framework, emphasizing the need for a more streamlined and efficient electoral process. Historically, the Congress party has been sceptical of this idea, having previously dismissed similar proposals when they were put forth by former Prime Minister A B Vajpayee and later by BJP leader L K Advani. The current push for this reform comes at a significant time, coinciding with the completion of 100 days of Modi's third term in office, which may be seen as a strategic move to consolidate support and showcase governance credentials.

This reform is not just a new idea; it has been a part of the BJP's electoral manifestos for nearly two decades, reflecting the party's commitment to altering the electoral landscape in India. While the proposal seems logical and potentially beneficial, it raises several critical questions that need to be addressed. For instance, is India truly prepared for such a sweeping reform? Does Prime Minister Modi have the necessary two-

thirds majority in Parliament to pass the constitutional amendment bill? Furthermore, is there a genuine political consensus on this issue, or will it remain a point of contention among various political factions?

The most pressing concern is that the bill can only be enacted with a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha. In the recent 2024 elections, the BJP fell short of a clear majority, securing 40 seats less than required to govern independently. Consequently, the party has had to rely on alliances with regional partners such as the Janata Dal (United) and the Telugu Desam Party to maintain its governance. This reliance on allies underscores the importance of garnering support from other political entities to push the bill through. Proponents of the 'one-nation-one-poll' system argue that it could significantly reduce the disruptions caused by frequent electoral cycles and lower the overall costs associated with conducting multiple elections.

However, this proposal faces staunch opposition from several political parties, including the Congress, Left parties, Trinamool Congress, and various regional and smaller parties. Former President Ram Nath Kovind's committee has reached a unanimous decision to endorse the proposal for simultaneous elections in India after extensive consultations with various political parties. In total, thirty-two parties have expressed their support for this initiative, while fifteen have voiced their opposition.

This broad spectrum of feedback highlights the diverse political landscape in the country and the varying perspectives on electoral reform. In addition to the endorsement of the proposal, the committee has noted that

the central government has established a dedicated panel to oversee the implementation of the proposal. This panel is expected to play a crucial role in ensuring that the transition to simultaneous elections is smooth and effective. One of the key recommendations from the committee is the creation of a unified electoral roll that would be applicable for all elections—national, state, and local.

This move aims to streamline the voting process and reduce the likelihood of errors in voter registration, thereby enhancing the overall integrity of the electoral system. The committee has also proposed a bifurcation of the voting process. Under this plan, the first segment of voting would encompass elections for the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and state assemblies, while the second segment would pertain to local bodies. This dual approach is intended to maintain a structured electoral process while addressing the complexities of conducting simultaneous elections.

Historically, India conducted elections in a synchronized manner from the first general election in 1952 until 1967. This practice was disrupted when Indira Gandhi came to power, as she began to invoke Article 356 of the Constitution to dissolve opposition-led state governments. This led to a series of independent elections that have continued to this day, creating a fragmented electoral cycle. However, the proposed bill faces significant constitutional, legal, and political challenges.

The committee has recommended amendments to the last five articles of the Constitution to facilitate the implementation of simultaneous elections across the nation, specifically targeting Articles 83 and 172.

Currently, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) does not hold a two-thirds majority in Parliament, which is necessary for passing constitutional amendments. Furthermore, the Constitution does not explicitly mandate simultaneous elections, adding another layer of complexity to the proposal. A critical challenge lies in Prime Minister Modi's ability to garner sufficient support from Members of Parliament, particularly from opposition parties that remain skeptical of the initiative.

The political landscape is further complicated by the fact that a consensus among parties is still elusive. The current political landscape reveals a pronounced confrontational stance from the Opposition, which has yet to align itself with the proposal for simultaneous elections.

Their resistance stems from a belief that such a move would disproportionately benefit the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), thereby skewing the electoral playing field in their favour. Prominent political entities, most notably the Indian National Congress, have voiced their opposition to this initiative, expressing concerns over its implications for democratic fairness and electoral integrity.

In addition to Congress, several other significant parties, including the Left Front, Trinamool Congress, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), have also dismissed the concept of simultaneous elections.

This collective dissent is substantial, as it represents a coalition of 15 parties that together account for 205 Members of Parliament (MPs). In contrast, Prime Minister Narendra Modi requires a total of 362 votes to successfully push this legislation through Parliament, highlighting the uphill

battle he faces in garnering the necessary support. Implementing simultaneous elections necessitates a robust legal framework to facilitate the required adjustments. Such a framework could potentially address several pressing issues, including the frequent collapse of state governments mid-term and the political manoeuvring often employed by the central government to influence state-level politics. The proposal carries merit, particularly in its potential to reduce financial waste associated with conducting multiple elections, prevent policy stagnation that arises from constant electoral cycles, and minimize the overall frequency of elections that can overwhelm both voters and political parties alike.

Given these considerations, the Opposition should seriously reconsider their outright rejection of the proposal. Instead of dismissing it entirely, they ought to engage in constructive dialogue and present their alternative plans for public discussion.

This approach would not only demonstrate their commitment to democratic processes but also provide a platform for collaborative problem-solving in the realm of electoral reform.

Overall, Modi's strategic approach to advancing this legislation in Parliament is noteworthy. Regardless of the eventual outcome, he stands to gain politically; a successful passage of the bill would fulfil a key campaign promise, reinforcing his image as a decisive leader.

Conversely, should the bill fail, he could frame the defeat as a consequence of Opposition obstructionism, thereby positioning himself as a well-intentioned reformer thwarted by political rivals.