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View Point

Attempted Coup in Bangladesh: The India Factor

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The recent reports of an attempted coup in Bangladesh by a group of anti-India army officers to overthrow the elected government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reveal the politically potent threat to the country's fragile democracy represented by a combination of religious fanaticism and anti-India bigotry. A parliamentary democracy since 1990, Bangladesh has seen its founding father Mujibur Rehman and his successor President Ziaur Rahman killed in military coups. It was during the 15 years of military junta rule (1975 -1990) that the seeds of anti-India sentiments were sowed by portraying India as an 'unloved hegemon' and highlighting the country's distinct identity based on what a noted Bangladeshi scholar Ali Riaz calls 'we vs. they.' The nostalgia of shared history, culture and food habits, not to speak of the India's midwife role in its birth in 1971, was all dismissed by the military's need for producing alternative narratives emphasizing distinctiveness to legitimize its control of state power. Predictably, the recent plot to topple a stable civilian government was hatched by those elements in Bangladeshi military uneasy with the Awami League government's closeness to India.

Based on the unique combination of land and language, nationalism in Bangladesh emerged in the course of the liberation struggle led by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman's Awami League. Soon after its independence in 1971, Bangladesh adopted East Bengali nationalism together with socialism, democracy and secularism as state

ideology, relegating Islam to private sphere. However, the assassination of Mujib and the overthrow of his government in August 1975 brought in an Islam-oriented state ideology. Under General Ziaur Rahman as the new ruler, the secular 'Bengali nationalism' was replaced by 'Bangladeshi nationalism.' Outwardly though inclusive, the new Bangladeshi nationalism essentially underlines the Muslim identity of the country, differentiating its Muslim majority Bengalis from their Hindu majority counterpart in West Bengal in India.

Reflective of the shift, ancient texts were researched by Bangladeshi historians to highlight the differences between the two Bengals despite occupying the same geographic space and common language and cultural practices. Some of them even came up with the thesis that Bengal in historical and cultural terms was not monolithic. Such narrations of distinctiveness were subsequently incorporated into the official ideology, which showcased the land's organic linkages with its religion.

Curiously, the efforts were not limited to state narratives alone; constitutional amendments were carried out to remove secularism as one of the founding principles of state policy. While citizens of the state were termed as Bangladeshi rather than as Bengali, articles were inserted in the Constitution stressing that the new state of Bangladesh would preserve and strengthen fraternal ties among the Muslim countries and work towards Islamic solidarity. More importantly, religion-based political parties banned by Mujib for their dubious role during the Liberation War (Mukti Jodha) were allowed to operate and increase their visibility in national politics. At the same time, the pro-Pakistani and anti-Liberation elements like Golam Azam and S. A. Rahman who were once accused of being a party to the gruesome killing of secular minded intellectuals and minority Hindus were allowed to return to the country and politically re-habilitated. Similar measures were undertaken by the next military junta ruler, General Ershad (1982-1990) who successfully created an anti-Indian constituency inside Bangladesh by giving religious colour to bilateral issues with India, notably sharing of the Farakka water.

As the religion-based Bangladeshi nationalism and anti-Indianism grew on parallel lines, the close proximity of the early nationalists to New Delhi became a political liability for the subsequent Awami League governments. So much so that

friendly pro-India gestures of the Sheikh Hasina government, notably its policy of zero-tolerance to the extremist outfits operating from Bangladeshi soil against India and handing over of the top ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) leaders to the Indian authorities were construed as attempts to please rulers in New Delhi. Unlike the ruling Awami League, the rival Bangladesh National Party (BNP) led by Khaleda Zia seems to be less sensitive to India's cross-border security concerns. The BNP, instead, prefers to continue the legacy of its founder, General Zia who quietly steered his country from Awami League's pro-India foreign policy in the latter half of the 1970s. During this period, Bangladesh expanded its relations with the Muslim world, which, together with the inflow of petro-dollars, resulted in the increased use of Islamic symbols and quantum growth of 'institutional Islam.'

The beneficiaries of the oil-money were various Islamist organizations already active in spreading an orthodox narrow version of Islam in a country known for its local syncretistic cultural practices as reflected in Bengali folk cult, literature, music and festivals. Encouraged by the military regime and external material support, the Islamist groups invested in all major economic activity to fund their activities and feed their expanding constituency. In the following decade, many of such groups flourished particularly when the BNP and the Jamaat were in power together, which led some western observers to caution the 'impending threat of Talibanisation of the polity.' Bangladesh, indeed, experienced a spell of Jihadi terrorism followed by street battles between Zia and Hasina's supporters that prompted the army to step in again in January 2007. Two years later, the government of Hasina, whose party won the December 2008 elections with sweeping majority, was hit by a military rebellion in which 57 army officers were killed by renegade border guards.

Although a semblance of stability was restored with the Awami League coming to power, tensions between Hasina's government and elements of the military persisted since the 2009 mutiny. What is more, the crackdown on Islamist elements has not gone down well with right-wing sympathisers in the country. Among the Islamist groups targeted by the present government apart from the *Jamaat-e-Islammi* have been the *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen* Bangladesh, the *Hiz-ut-Tahrir*, the *Hizb-ut-Towhid* and the *Chhatra Shibir*. Most of these Bangladeshi Islamist outfits are traditionally anti-India in their views, and have been feeling marginalised during

Sheikh Hasina's regime. Already the government's move to bolster the secular character of the Bangladeshi Constitution has sparked a series of angry protests by Islamic activists. Likewise, Prime Minister Hasina has incurred the latter's wrath by attempting to bring the perpetrators and collaborators of the 1971 War of Independence to justice. The national struggle of Bangladesh resulted in the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths and most inhuman killing of a number of prominent civil society members by the collaborators of the Pakistani military. The reopening of the trial has led to the arrest of the top Jamaat leaders including Amir Golam Azam and some belonging to the BNP.

In the backdrop of these developments, the coup seems to be a desperate attempt to get rid of the Hasina government by those averse to pro-liberation forces and its pro-India leanings. Although the coup attempt was foiled, the risk of such political adventurism remains a source of concern as much for the liberal Bangladeshis as for the policy-makers in New Delhi. Given the strategic saliency of Bangladesh as India's link with the ASEAN and deepening of friendly ties under the government of Sheikh Hasina, India cannot afford a passive approach. While keeping a close watch on developments in Bangladesh, India has to ensure that the pace of its assistance is within the comfortable standards of the government in power.

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