

Why Yunus' government can't overlook jihadi groups exploiting Bangladesh's turmoil

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The return of previously suppressed Islamists and jihadists could be supported by external forces seeking to destabilise the region for their strategic gains



The aftermath of Sheikh Hasina's ouster has also seen a troubling increase in sectarian violence, which is the toughest challenge for the Muhammad Yunus' government to tackle. Image Courtesy AP

Bangladesh, once hailed as a model for development in South Asia, now finds itself at a critical juncture. The recent political upheaval and the shift in power dynamics have set the stage for a potentially volatile future. The resignation of Sheikh Hasina, one of the most influential political figures in the country's history, has left a void that could be filled by forces threatening to destabilize the nation. This commentary seeks to explore the underlying causes of the current situation, the implications of the recent developments, and the challenges ahead for Bangladesh.

The Last Straw and Challenges Ahead

The immediate trigger for the current crisis was Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's announcement on August 1, 2024, that the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), would be treated as militant groups. This decision, rooted in their alleged involvement in violent protests related to the government's job quota system, was seen as an attempt to curb rising extremism. Hasina's emphasis on treating these groups as militant threats was not entirely misplaced, given their past actions and conspiracies

with opposition forces like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other anti-Hasina elements, both domestic and international. However, the decision was hasty and poorly executed, reflecting a dangerous complacency within the government, particularly regarding the potential vulnerabilities within the police and armed forces.

Violence and sporadic clashes continue across the country, with the army and police struggling to maintain order, often at the cost of casualties. With Hasina's departure, Bangladesh has entered a period of uncertainty. A caretaker government led by a Nobel Laureate, Mohammed Yunus, is now expected to oversee a smooth transition to democracy. However, the reality on the ground is stark. The new government has a major task in hand to deal with the pro-Islamist political and religious groups such as the BNP, Jel, and Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI). These religious groups and political parties are loose cannons and always nourish ambition of establishing Islamic rule in Bangladesh as they despise democracy in every form. Encouraged by the developments, embattled Jammāt e Islami now carrying out campaign for his deceased leader Delawar Hossain Saeedee, convicted for war crime by previous government, with a message that "peace will not return until the religion of Allah is established". This says a lot about the future course of action of Jel in Bangladesh.

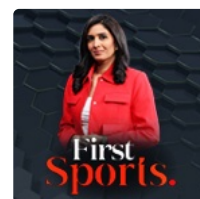
Resurging Extremism?

Extremist forces, subdued under Hasina's rule and the country's counter-terrorism policies, see this as an opportunity to regain strength. Groups like Jama'at Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB and other factions) and Ansar-al Islam and Harakt ul Jihadi Islami (HUJI) affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have already begun to regroup, with propaganda materials resurfacing that call for action against the secular government. Several jihadist affiliated web portals, which were blocked or banned under the previous administration, have been reactivated and continue to publish extremist materials and translations of global jihadist literature. The emergence of newly organized terror groups such as Jamatul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS), which shares its objectives with the parent HuJI and AQIS, and the resurgence of another AQIS-linked faction Ansar al-Islam through its newly formed strike group 'Shahadat' raised critical questions about the

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down and navigate these challenges.

Amidst this chaos, jihadist groups have seized the opportunity to reactivate their propaganda channels. Jihadi forums and networks affiliated with Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, especially Al-Firdaws and Dawahllah, An Nasr and other extremist groups are once again operational, spreading messages that call for action against secular and non-Islamic forces within Bangladesh. AQIS, in particular, has issued statements urging the Bangladeshi Muslim community to remain steadfast in their beliefs and to resist external influences, including those from India, which they accuse of being enemies of Islam. The present Pakistan-based AQIS leader, Usama Mahmud, in the message titled "Bangladesh is the beacon of hope for the victory of Islam in the region", calls to exploit political instability by rallying support for a broader Islamist agenda. He praises the ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and advocates for the establishment of a "pure" Islamic government, aiming to shift the protests in this direction. Mahmud's rejection of the interim government highlights AQIS's strategy to dismantle secular state structures, pushing instead for a theocratic regime that aligns with their long-term objectives across the Muslim world.

This resurgence of jihadist outreach and propaganda is a clear indication that extremist groups are capitalising on the current instability. The caretaker government should not overlook these developments and will need to act swiftly to counter these narratives and prevent these groups from gaining further ground.

Previously, on August 04, the Islamic State Khorasan province issued a message titled "A Message for Bangladesh", which called on the people of Bangladesh to exploit the unrest to replace the existing government with an Islamic state as per Sharia laws. Labelling the Hasina government as corrupt and allied with anti-Islamic forces, IS urges the rejection of elections and advocates for Sharia law. This message was timed to coincide with ongoing turmoil in the country and aims at destabilising the region by inciting anger and mobilizing support for an Islamic regime.

Rising Sectarian Tensions

The aftermath of Hasina's ouster has also seen a troubling increase in sectarian violence. Incidents of persecution against minority communities, including Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists, have surged, with over 200 cases reported across 52 districts according to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad (BHBCOP) and Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad (BPUP) who are spearheading minority rights in the country. These incidents highlight the fragility of Bangladesh's social fabric and the potential for further violence if these tensions are not addressed. Another minority conglomerate, the Bangladesh Jatiya Hindu Mahazot (BJHM), representing 23 Hindu organizations, reported widespread attacks and threats against the Hindu community. On August 13, the BJHM detailed 278 incidents across 48 districts, including vandalism, looting, arson, and land grabbing, targeting Hindus amidst the shifting political landscape.

It is highly possible minority communities, along with pro-Hasina supporters, may soon take to the streets in a bid to protect themselves and counter the growing influence of Islamists and criminal elements. As these groups organise, the potential for widespread unrest increases, further complicating the task of the caretaker government.

External Influences and Vested Interests



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Amid the chaos came the conspiracy theories. Unconfirmed intelligence reports from Bangladesh suggest that the blueprint for the recent regime change, triggered by mass protests over the quota system, was allegedly drafted in London with Pakistan's ISI. Officials claim to have evidence of meetings between Tarique Rahman, acting chief of the BNP, and ISI officials in Saudi Arabia. The reported goal of Pakistan's ISI, the Pakistan Army, and China was to destabilize the government, reinstall the pro-Pakistan BNP, and force Sheikh Hasina to flee to India. However, this conspiracy theory remains unproven. Another theory has a US angle indicating that it played an active role in ousting Hasina because it wanted control over Bangladesh's Saint Martin island in the Bay of Bengal.

While these theories can be dumped in oblivion, the leadership change in Bangladesh could benefit various vested interest groups, including influential international players and exiled political and religious leaders. Many of these individuals have long been critical of Hasina's government, and they may now see an opportunity to influence the country's future direction. Moreover, the return of previously suppressed Islamists and jihadists could be supported by external forces seeking to destabilise the region for their strategic gains. The situation in Bangladesh bears troubling similarities to that of Pakistan, where a similar dynamic of elites versus common citizens and Islamists versus the state has played out with devastating consequences.

A Cautionary Tale for India

For India, the developments in Bangladesh are of significant concern. Instability in Bangladesh could have severe repercussions for Northeast India, West Bengal, and, ultimately, the entire country. India has always desired regional stability and has stood by Bangladesh through various challenges. However, as the situation unfolds, India must remain vigilant and prepared to respond to any spillover effects from Bangladesh's internal conflicts. India must also resist any external pressure tactics from Bangladesh or international forces seeking to influence its stance. The priority should be to ensure that Bangladesh remains stable and that extremist forces are prevented from gaining a foothold.

Conclusion

The situation in Bangladesh is fluid and fraught with challenges. The coming months will be critical in determining the country's future trajectory. Political infighting, the resurgence of extreme Islamism, and minority discontent are likely to pose significant challenges to the caretaker government. Additionally, the ongoing Rohingya crisis and tensions with Myanmar will continue to keep the administration on edge.

As Bangladesh navigates this turbulent period, the international community, including India, must watch closely and be prepared to support efforts to maintain stability. The stakes are high, and the consequences of failure could be far-reaching for Bangladesh and the entire region.

The author is executive director, Society for the Study of Peace and conflict, New Delhi. The views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the writer. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.

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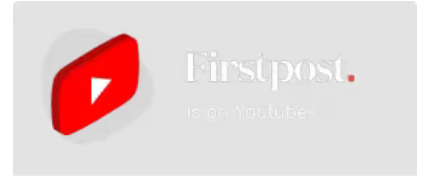
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