



The Enduring Shadow of Extremism: Tackling Radicalisation In the Bangladeshi Diaspora

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By Iftekharul Bashar

SYNOPSIS

The recent arrests in Malaysia confirm that radicalisation within the Bangladeshi diaspora is a significant and evolving threat. This problem stems from socioeconomic factors, homeland instability, and online recruitment. A transparent, collaborative, and multi-faceted P/CVE (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism) approach is essential to mitigate the risk.

COMMENTARY

Malaysian authorities recently [arrested](#) 36 Bangladeshi citizens in Selangor and Johor for their involvement in a radical militant movement promoting Islamic State (IS) ideology. Home Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail reported that these individuals were forming recruitment cells, fundraising for terrorism, and plotting to overthrow the Bangladesh government.

Notably, the [network](#), as detailed by police, raised funds using international fund transfer services and e-wallets, directing money to the IS group in Syria and Bangladesh. This method highlights a growing trend in terrorist financing, leveraging the speed, lower costs, and often less stringent oversight of digital platforms and cross-border money movement to facilitate illicit financial flows globally.

Of those arrested, five have been charged with terrorism-related offences, 15 face deportation, and 16 remain under investigation, with the police anticipating further arrests. Malaysian authorities estimate that [100 to 150 individuals are suspected to be involved](#) in this network, demonstrating the scale of the threat they are actively dismantling.

These arrests are a stark reminder that the threat of extremism continues to cast a long shadow, not just within Bangladesh's national borders but also across diaspora communities. The arrest of the 36 nationals is not an isolated incident. There have been previous cases of radicalisation of Bangladeshis in Malaysia.

In May 2019, a 28-year-old Bangladeshi mechanic was [arrested](#) in Kuala Kedah; he had possessed the necessary chemicals and expertise to produce improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Earlier in January 2017, two Bangladeshi salesmen, aged 27 and 28, were [arrested](#) in Kuala Lumpur, reportedly for having ties with suspected IS militants in Bangladesh and for planning to join a terror cell in the southern Philippines.

Singapore, among other nations, has also experienced similar cases in the past, notably in [2015](#), [2016](#), and [2020](#), highlighting a recurring pattern of Bangladeshi diaspora members being targeted and recruited by terrorist networks, including the Islamic State.

The Vulnerability of the Diaspora

Several factors contribute to this diasporic vulnerability. There exists a radicalisation crisis within Bangladeshi diaspora communities in many countries, not just in Malaysia. This is partly attributable to a substantial portion of these communities being expatriate workers, often with limited formal education, who may not be capable of critically assessing extremist narratives.

The recent arrests in Malaysia, for instance, involved individuals primarily employed in factories, construction, and services, highlighting how these vulnerable groups can be targeted. These individuals, often isolated from others in their host societies, can develop a sense of disillusionment or alienation, making them susceptible to extremist ideologies that promise a sense of belonging or purpose.

The political instability in Bangladesh, particularly after the recent regime change, has reportedly led to a weakening of the law enforcement infrastructure. This has created security vacuums, with reports of prison escapes, including of militants from groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Such internal vulnerabilities can have ripple effects, emboldening extremist elements to extend their reach into overseas communities.

The Evolving Landscape of Recruitment

Active recruitment within diaspora networks is a significant concern. This recruitment is not confined to blue-collar workers; increasingly, white-collar professionals and students are also being drawn into the radical ideologies. A new generation of extremist ideologues, preachers, and activists is emerging, who are often urbane, mainstream educated, and professionally accomplished, making the threat more insidious and harder to detect through traditional profiling.

The ongoing Gaza crisis appears to have a profound effect, serving as a potent catalyst for radicalisation. The perception of global Muslim victimisation can ignite a sense of grievance and a desire for action, which extremist groups readily exploit. This

emotional resonance, combined with sophisticated online propaganda, amplifies the reach of radical narratives. A 2020 survey by Bangladesh police found that 82 per cent of extremists were inspired by social media propaganda, and 80 per cent used encrypted messaging apps for communication, underscoring the critical role of online platforms.

The Role of Religious Organisations

Some Bangladeshi observers have emphasised the need for domestic mass Muslim organisations such as Tabligh Jamaat and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) to play a bigger role in countering extremist influence. Despite their influence over their mass followings, both groups have failed to create a strong narrative to counter radicalisation.

In fact, some expatriates associated with Tabligh Jamaat and BJI are becoming radicalised. This suggests a gap in the ability of these influential religious bodies to effectively guide their followers away from extremist interpretations, perhaps due to a lack of structured theological frameworks or outreach programmes targeting modern radicalisation trends.

A Comprehensive Path Forward

Therefore, a proactive and multi-pronged approach to counter diasporic radicalisation is essential. Crucially, the Bangladeshi government needs to be unequivocally proactive. There has been a tendency in the past to downplay or even deny instances of diaspora radicalisation. This approach is counterproductive. Transparency and a willingness to acknowledge the problem are the first steps towards effective solutions.

Bangladeshi diplomatic missions abroad must intensify their community engagement efforts. These missions should not merely serve consular functions but become vibrant hubs for promoting social cohesion, interfaith dialogue, and cultural exchange. Cultural centres, if established, could play a vital role in preserving Bangladeshi identity while fostering integration and resilience against extremist narratives.

Joint research initiatives between Bangladesh and host countries are also critical to understanding the specific drivers of radicalisation within the diaspora. This includes studying the socioeconomic conditions, identity crises, and online vulnerabilities that make individuals susceptible to extremist recruitment. Sharing information and intelligence with host governments is paramount for coordinated counterterrorism efforts.

Furthermore, Bangladesh needs to recalibrate its Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) strategies, placing a greater emphasis on online and on-ground engagement with the diaspora, particularly the youth who are often grappling with identity issues in foreign lands. This involves promoting digital literacy, developing robust counter-narratives to extremist propaganda, and supporting moderate voices online.

Empowering local communities and civil society organisations to lead P/CVE initiatives can be highly effective, as they possess the grassroots understanding necessary to

reach at-risk individuals. The monitoring and review of Bangladeshi Bengali online religious content is crucial, and moderate voices must be actively amplified across online platforms.

There is an urgent need for Bangladeshi religious leaders to address current issues by fostering a strong connection between the government, Islamic education, and religious schools. This system should include a central body for issuing religious rulings, an expert committee comprising representatives from diverse fields, and a legal review board that consists of both religious scholars and judges.

Additionally, Bangladesh should actively participate in global forums and initiatives involving moderate and progressive Islamic scholars. Engaging with an international community of Islamic scholars can provide valuable insights, best practices, and a unified front against extremist ideologies, strengthening Bangladesh's theological capacity to counter radicalisation.

Finally, those found to be involved in radical militant activities must be investigated thoroughly and face appropriate legal consequences. This will send a clear message that such actions will not be tolerated, irrespective of where they originate. Pre-departure training or briefings for diaspora departures can be helpful in this regard, as they educate departing families, workers, and students on extremist influences and how to avoid them. Above all, there is a need for host countries to ensure that large diaspora communities are effectively engaged in preventing extremism and building social cohesion.

Conclusion

The threat of radicalisation within the Bangladeshi diaspora is real and evolving. It demands a comprehensive, transparent, and collaborative response from the Bangladeshi government, its diplomatic missions, community organisations, and international partners. By fostering tolerance, inclusivity, and social cohesion, and by addressing the root causes of vulnerability, Bangladesh can protect its citizens and its vital economic interests from the enduring shadow of extremism.

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