The ISA Arrests:
The Domestic Context in Bangladesh

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The recent arrests of Bangladeshi foreign workers in Singapore demonstrate that the extremist Islamist challenge within Bangladesh is beginning to affect regional neighbours. Dhaka needs to exercise zero tolerance toward the threat.

Commentary

THE RECENT arrests in Singapore under the Internal Security Act of two separate groups of Bangladeshi foreign workers – 27 late last year and a further eight last month – have raised eyebrows. The arrests are instructive in three senses:

First, they show how the competition between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for leadership of the global jihad movement has become globalised. Second, they reinforce how extremist Islamist ideology – a worldview that justifies the violent setting up of an Islamic State - can thrive in a conducive sociopolitical environment. Third, they affirm that confronting extremist Islamism simply requires zero tolerance.

The Globalised Al Qaeda-ISIS Contest

Recent terror incidents in the region exemplify the intensifying competition between Al Qaeda and one of its ideological offshoots, ISIS, for pre-eminence in the global extremist Islamist movement. This contest began the day ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi self-proclaimed his "Caliphate" in June 2014 in Iraq and called on the world's Muslims to pledge allegiance to it.

ISIS, till then just a particularly formidable splinter of the parent Al Qaeda network,

suddenly assumed huge significance amongst extremist Islamists worldwide. Al Qaeda had always conceptualised the Caliphate as a downstream aspiration, but ISIS (renaming itself as 'Islamic State') has been seeking to realise it in the present time.

This was evidenced by its military conquests and territorial control over swathes of land in Iraq and Syria, enabling it to inspire tens of thousands to join the ranks as foreign terrorist fighters. While the Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra continued to represent the former's interests in Syria in clashes with both the Assad regime as well as ISIS, Al Qaeda leaders were keen to signal to would-be supporters and potential recruits worldwide that they were still worthy of support.

The regional franchise Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was thus established to radicalise that region's huge Muslim population. One country targeted in this new Al Qaeda strategic thrust is Bangladesh, not only for its own Muslim population but also because of its strategic location, abetting geographically on eastern India and Myanmar – and by implication, Southeast Asia.

Culture War: Secularism and Extremist Islamism

Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, seceded violently from Pakistan in December 1971. Its founding leader, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, envisaged Bangladesh as a constitutionally secular country although about 90 percent of the population is Muslim. Hence the native Bengali culture of the country, as well as the customs and practices of other creeds such as Hinduism, Christianity and of course Islam have traditionally enjoyed protection.

However, since 1972, the military governments that have intervened in the often unstable democratic political process, politicised Islam in order to burnish their legitimacy against the backdrop of growing Islamic revivalism of the late 1970s and 1980s. These military regimes dropped the secularism principle from the constitution in 1977 and declared Islam the state religion in 1988.

While the Bangladeshi Supreme Court reasserted the constitutional secular principle in 2010, Islam remains the state religion. The combined impact of these constitutional adjustments, the long term influence of Saudi-funded mosques and madrassas promoting the puritanical Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, and the return of large numbers of Bangladeshi workers from the Middle East where they had been immersed in Wahhabi orthodoxy, have been crucial. These trends have arguably contributed to a societal environment conducive to the gestation of extremist Islamism.

Long before AQIS emerged in 2014, therefore, Bangladesh was already experiencing a culture war between secular, liberal civil society on the one hand and increasingly extremist Islamists on the other. As early as August 2005, one homegrown Islamist group, Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) had gained notoriety for setting off hundreds of bombs nationwide, although the death count was thankfully low. JMB has since been banned.

Other homegrown extremist Islamist groups have been banned as well, but

nevertheless still appear to function discreetly. What has complicated the situation now is the aforementioned Al Qaeda-ISIS contest. Thus the recent spate of deadly machete attacks on secular and liberal figures have been executed apparently by newer transnationally-linked outfits affiliated with AQIS, such as the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and its successor Ansar al-Islam group.

Bangladesh in the Context of ISIS 'Caliphate'

Meanwhile, the latest April issue of *Dabiq*, the ISIS online magazine, reports that a command structure in Bangladesh has been set up with a view to ultimately incorporate the country within the ISIS Caliphate. ISIS had claimed responsibility for eight low-key attacks in the country since September 2015. However the *amir* of the ISIS Bangladeshi operation, Sheikh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, has expressed his intention to conduct a large domestic attack to boost ISIS' credentials amongst homegrown extremists in the country. Christian missionaries, Hindu figures, Shia, and foreigners have been identified as potential targets.

Most recently, the murder on 23 April 2016 of English Professor Rezaul Karim Siddiqui was claimed by ISIS. Siddiqui was apparently a defender of Bengali music, poetry and literature. He never had a history of making anti-Muslim comments, yet he was apparently targeted for his "call to atheism". Siddiqui's assassination suggests that the extremist Islamist war on the Bengali secular experiment can only intensify – thanks to ongoing AQIS-ISIS competition for bragging rights and recruits.

There is therefore a struggle going on for the cultural ethos of Muslim-majority but constitutionally secular Bangladesh. Moreover the growing AQIS-ISIS rivalry apparently being played out on Bangladeshi soil is impacting even Singapore.

While the first group of Bangladeshis arrested in Singapore late last year was apparently linked to the AQIS-affiliated ABT, the individuals detained in April aspired to be part of ISIS. Dhaka should openly confront the real nature of the threat and crack down decisively on homegrown and transnational extremist Islamist groups.

Zero tolerance is the key, as in Singapore. While a much smaller city-state, Singapore's policy of zero tolerance of extremist Islamism is sensible. If not checked by systematic educational and tough legislative measures, extremist Islamism – not Islam the faith - could destroy Singapore's multi-cultural fabric. Dhaka and Singapore have thus much reason to dialogue and collaborate even further.

Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna is Head of Policy Studies and Coordinator of the National Security Studies Programme in the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An earlier version appeared in The Straits Times.