

The Radicalisation of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Singapore

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Abstract

This discovery of radicalised individuals among blue-collar Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore in 2015 and 2016 raises the question of why and how some individuals from this demographic group may embrace extremist ideologies. This paper explores the factors for their radicalisation and argues that various dynamics in the global and domestic environments of these workers interact and align to influence their radicalisation.

Background

In 2015 and 2016, two separate groups of blue-collar Bangladeshi migrant workers (BBMW) in Singapore were arrested and deported back on charges of violent-extremism. Both groups had pent-up grievances against the Awami League (AL)-led Bangladeshi government and wanted to topple it through violence and establish their version of an Islamic state.

Bangladesh witnessed its worst terrorist incident in 2016 when militants from the Neo Jamaat-ul-Mujahedeen Bangladesh attacked and killed 18 foreigners at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka. Incidentally, two of the five attackers were radicalised in Malaysia. According to the International Crisis Group, terrorist cells in Bangladesh frequently communicate with migrants in Singapore and Malaysia, who have been key to the evolution of the radical Islamist movement in Bangladesh,¹ which suggests that migrant workers pose a potential security threat to Bangladesh. In this paper, we argue that a complex interplay and alignment of factors created a conducive environment for the emergence and growth of extremist ideologies amongst the BBMW of Singapore. Their susceptibility to radical Islamist ideology is influenced by (1) global currents and developments; (2) internal dynamics in Bangladesh; and (3) factors in Singapore.

Global Currents and Developments

Religion and ethnicity are widely acknowledged as powerful expressions of group and personal identity. Some BBMW turn to religion for comfort and assistance to cope with the considerable emotional and psychological strains of being away from home. Thus, religion becomes central to their identity. Furthermore, increasing Islamophobia around the world has catalysed the “racialisation” of Muslims as a monolithic category irrespective of national, ethnic and/or linguistic affiliations.² Specifically, in the face of intensified hostility and

¹ International Crisis Group. “Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh”, International Crisis Group (2018).

² Kibria, Nazli, “Muslim encounters in the global economy: Identity developments of labor migrants from Bangladesh to the Middle East.” Ethnicities (2008).

scrutiny, many Muslims cultivate an increased self-conscious sense of collective identity as Muslims and a cemented sense of group solidarity. The global war on terror, the Arab-Israeli conflict, American foreign policy in the Middle East, and the oppression or perpetration of human rights violations against Muslim citizens in India and Myanmar have shaped the worldview of many BMW in Singapore. Being Muslims, they view these perceived aggressions as an attack on Islam and, thus, a threat to their identity. Perceived threats to the in-group leads to increased group cohesion and creates an “us”/“them” dichotomy.³ This, in turn, motivates some to foster a political attachment to the global brotherhood of Muslims and triggers curiosity in the cultivation and support for Islamist movements (including violent ones) who engage in identity politics to mobilise individuals around strong in-group and outgroup narratives.⁴

Correspondingly, developments in technology have had substantive transformative effects as the Internet has created gateways that give access to extremist groups or individuals to connect with one another and disseminate their ideology. Multimedia-creation software has permitted creating and manipulating videos, photos and stylised texts which are used to misrepresent material facts to support radical ideologies. Radical Islamist groups use these avenues to offer camaraderie and forge a sense of belonging that appeals to alienated individuals such as the BMW in Singapore. This helps them to frame narratives that best resonate with the sentiments, interests and views of their potential recruits.⁵ For instance, they constantly emphasise the Muslim identity and exploit anxieties over perceived threats to their values and ways of life. Their propaganda materials recurrently include troubling images of Muslim civilian deaths to foster righteous indignation among individuals. In their narrative as the self-appointed defenders of the *ummah* (community of Muslims), they compel Muslims to avenge their coreligionists. The key to radicalisation is whether the movement’s version of ‘reality’ resonates or can be brought to resonate with the movement’s potential constituency. Some scholars have referred to this process as ‘frame alignment’.⁶ Radicalisation then takes place as a response to “proxy” subjugation, where group identity (as the global community of Muslims) is powerful enough to make people feel aggrieved and angry without undergoing the hostilities directly.

Internal Dynamics in Bangladesh

With family and kin back home and the transient nature of their stay in Singapore, the BMW have deep-seated sentiments about Bangladesh and are shaped by the religio-political developments in Bangladesh.

Violence has been a feature of politics in Bangladesh since its independence. The country has witnessed two military takeovers, assassinations of its heads of state, including its founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and several coup attempts. A zero-sum attitude has shaped the landscape of Bangladeshi politics ever since the end of the military dictatorship in 1991.

³ Moghaddam, Fathali M. “The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration.” *American Psychologist* (2005).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wiktorowicz, Quintan. “Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory: A New Direction for Research.” *Mediterranean Politics* (2002).

⁶ Dalggaard-Nielsen, Anja. “Studying violent radicalization in Europe II: The potential contribution of socio-psychological and psychological approaches.” DIIS Working Paper (2008).

Since then, the state's two main political parties – the AL and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have traded power;⁷ whichever one was leading the administration concentrated on elevating itself and weakening the other.⁸ The rise in Islamist extremism among Bangladeshis developed parallel to the unfolding political crisis amid deep political polarisation in Bangladesh. As it is, Bangladesh suffers from a conflict in identity – being Muslim vs being Bengali. Bengali nationalism is rooted in the Bengali ethno-linguistic identity and underplays the role of religion. In contrast, Bangladeshi nationalism is explicitly Islamic in character, and contains a blend of culture and religion. It stresses that Muslim distinctiveness was the basis of the movement for the creation of Pakistan in 1947,⁹ from which Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state in 1971. Various political parties in Bangladesh have exploited this ethno-religious fault-line, the legacy of which still persists. While the current party in power, the AL, is generally associated with Bengali nationalism, the BNP and numerous other Islamist parties have invigorated a Muslim identity for Bangladesh. Today, sections of the populace are drawn to Islamism in their quest for a distinctly Islamic identity for Bangladesh.

The rift between the AL and the BNP, and their non-cooperative, monopolistic attitude in dealing with religio-political issues, has not only caused the country's political culture to steadily deteriorate but also reverberated the increasingly binary division. It intensified due to the execution of AL's opposition leaders who were from the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami¹⁰ (BJI) for war crimes and reached a crescendo with the 2014 general elections and the political violence that accompanied it – creating space for extremism to flourish within the country. The AL and its supporters are branded as atheists/anti-Islam whereas the BNP/BJI and its supporters are characterised as *razakars* (supporters of Pakistan – a pejorative term implying traitor).¹¹ Every significant event in the country is interpreted through this lens. For instance, the Shahbagh mobilisation – to quell the 2013 protests by Islamist supporters in the precinct of Shahbagh – irrespective of its popular appeal, was interpreted as two very diverging things: a representation of justice or, alternatively, a persecution of Islamists and their political allies. Many BBMW argue that the Bangladeshi government disregarded basic laws in the name of fighting terrorism. Amnesty International reported that Bangladeshi Security forces indiscriminately arrested and, in numerous cases, executed “suspected militants”, who were often opposition activists and supporters.¹²

Human Rights Watch has, on numerous instances, highlighted how torture is used in Bangladesh to extract confessions and punish political opponents of the government.¹³ Enforced disappearances have also continued at an alarming rate.¹⁴ The killings and arbitrary

⁷ This is barring the military-backed interim government from 2007 to 2008.

⁸ Hossain, Akhand Akhtar. “Contested National Identity and Political Crisis in Bangladesh: Historical Analysis of the Dynamics of Bangladeshi Society and Politics.” Asian Journal of Political Science (2015).

⁹ The Partition of 1947 resulted in the creation of the Union of India and the Dominion of Pakistan — splitting Hindus and Muslims. The Dominion incorporated West (present-day Pakistan) and East (present-day Bangladesh) Pakistan.

¹⁰ BJI was allied with BNP during the war crimes trial.

¹¹ *Razakar* was a guerrilla force organised by the Pakistani Army, consisting anti-liberation, pro-Pakistan Bengalis and Urdu-speaking migrants who lived in Bangladesh during the Liberation War of 1971.

¹² Amnesty International, (March 02, 2017), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2017/03/bangladesh-man-released-from-long-secret-detention/>.

¹³ Human Rights Watch (2018), “Bangladesh: Events of 2017”, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/bangladesh>.

¹⁴ Odhikar (2017), “Bangladesh: Annual Human Rights Report 2016.”

arrests of supposedly innocent civilians has resulted in a sense of persecution among many BBMW. It has generated considerable amount of disappointment and, often, outright anger and resentment towards the government. The war on non-violent Islamists has prompted some BBMW to believe that the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is “trying to eliminate Islam and its influences from the socio-political landscape of the country”. According to an interview conducted with a BBMW, the AL has “vilified the mainstream Islamic institutions, groups and parties” in order to earn the support of India and certain Western nations – who are seen as hostile to Muslims.¹⁵ The systematic discrimination and brutality by the state against the Islamist voices in their home country has not only led to collective angst, frustration and injustice, but also instilled empathy among Bangladeshis who are not experiencing these sufferings directly. This has caused an identity-based moral backlash, which is being used to motivate societal activism, including violent actions. These deficits are delegitimising the Bangladeshi state and presenting opportunities for extremist groups to capitalise on shared identity and emotions, and justify violent activism in Bangladesh in the pursuit of the reformation of society and correcting grave injustices.

Perceived or real religio-political and economic injustices, and impunity for well-connected elites stemming from endemic corruption is also driving vulnerability to radicalisation. Bangladesh ranked 143rd among the 180 countries in Transparency International’s 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index. And the level of corruption is highest in labour migration. Abuse and exploitation of the BBMW occur at various stages of the migration cycle. For instance, there are high costs and fees to intermediaries in the recruitment process, discrepancy regarding their attachment to a specific employer, and divergence between contractual obligations and poor working and living conditions. When disenfranchised populations see leaders amassing wealth through corruption while failing to deliver services, they get angry and frustrated.¹⁶ It triggers political apathy, public disengagement, and nurtures moral outrage. This, in turn, challenges their prevailing beliefs, making individuals open to new ideas and susceptible to radicalisation.¹⁷ Through these movements, citizens seek to rectify problems perceived to cause the injustices.

Indeed, according to a RESOLVE Network¹⁸ survey by Riaz Ali and Syeda Salina Aziz, many Bangladeshis feel their rights are being impinged on and are dissatisfied with the political interference and bias of the government in judiciary matters.¹⁹ Up to 77 per cent see *Sharia* law as one way to reduce corruption and ensure impartiality. Some BBMW in Singapore hold similar sentiments regarding the positive association between *Sharia* laws and good governance. The establishment of a *Sharia*-based society and all-encompassing religio-political system is a dominant narrative in the discourse of radical Islamist movements – which, they proclaim, is the answer to every societal grievances Muslims face. To accomplish

¹⁵ Mohsina, Nazneen, “The migrant-radicalisation Nexus: the case of blue-collar Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore”, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (2018).

¹⁶ Hoffman, Bruce (2006). “Inside Terrorism” New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁷ Dalggaard-Nielsen, Anja. “Studying violent radicalization in Europe II: The potential contribution of socio-psychological and psychological approaches.” DIIS Working Paper (2008).

¹⁸ RESOLVE Network is a global consortium of researchers and research organizations committed to empirically driven, locally-defined research on the drivers of violent extremism and sources of community resilience.

¹⁹ Riaz, Ali, and Syeda Salina Aziz, “Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh: Surveying Support”, Resolve Network (2017).

this aim, they propound “uprooting the *murtad* (apostate) ruler of Bangladesh through violent *jihad* as the *taghut* government who uses man-made laws and will never listen to the pleas of the Muslims through peaceful means”²⁰.

Factors in Singapore

Migrant workers in Singapore are generally seen as inferior to and incompatible with the mainstream society. Stigmatisation of the Bangladeshis is particularly strong. They are often seen to be discriminated and belittled because of their nationality. The BBMW also feel a sense of powerlessness stemming from the economic insecurity caused by recruitment debt and the fear of being removed from Singapore at any time. As they develop a consciousness of the insignificance of Bangladeshi national identity, migrants become aware of the negative connotations that mark Bangladesh as a nation in the global arena. Hence, they start to prefer their other identity – being Muslims, and turn to Islamist movements (which provide a set of readymade answers to the questions of personal identity, and political and societal issues), which can be radical, as an alternative political ideology to change the current scenario and a plausible route to prosperity and order.

Transnational political Islam (including violent ones) preaches the return to the golden age of Islam and preaches the belief that that Muslim world is still being “colonised” by Western powers. Propaganda videos and other recruitment efforts by violent extremist organisations often invoke humiliation and the suffering of Muslims throughout the world. The commitment to their “*jihad*” is presented as a route to the regaining of their self-esteem whereby *ordinary* Muslim individuals have an opportunity to become “*heroic jihadis*” who are protecting the *ummah*. This narrative resonates with the marginalised and low-esteemed BBMW, who may be attracted to opportunities to regain a sense of self-worth and purpose, making them susceptible to radical organisations.²¹ Even though some may have little or no link with any particular group, they may become part of a broader, more amorphous radical Islamist movement.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned dynamics, it should be noted that the radicalisation of BBMW in Singapore is directed at “threats” perceived to be attacking their identity as Muslims. Insofar as they may face discrimination in Singapore, this is perceived to be a function of them being Bangladeshis, rather than Muslims. Furthermore, Singapore is perceived to be Muslim-friendly. As such, the radicalisation of BBMW is not directed at Singapore. This could explain why the two groups of radicalised BBMW detained in Singapore had no plans of executing attacks in the country.

Conclusion

The overlapping and intertwined dynamics, and various socio-political currents in the global, as well as the domestic domains of the BBMW community may engender some of them to accept radical Islamist ideologies/movements. Radical Islamist organisations are only likely to be successful when actual grievances exist. If global and/or homeland politics reinforce social

²⁰ Al-Balagh 1438. Titumir Media (2017).

²¹ Victoroff, Jeff, Janice R. Adelman, and Miriam Matthews. “Psychological factors associated with support for suicide bombing in the Muslim diaspora.” *Political Psychology* 33.6 (2012): 791-809.

and religio-political injustice and embolden the sense of Muslim victimhood, the extremists' appeal to the BBMW will strengthen. Radical Islamists have much attraction among marginalised and discriminated individuals. They may capitalise on the sentiments and emotional vulnerability of the BBMW, seek to exploit their religious and/or ethnic identity and appropriate and localise universalistic narratives to attract them. Their rhetoric may resonate with some BBMW whose beliefs and experiences align with the radical narrative, and are looking for justice and fairness, a clear sense of inclusion and purpose, and the opportunity to restore their sense of significance. This way, the BBMW can potentially be utilised as new combatants in the battle postulated against perceived injustice, exploitation and inequality.

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