

Who holds the key?

Conventional wisdom is that:

- BNP is not a fundamentalist party like Jamaat
- Unity between Awami League and BNP is the number one priority to save our country from extremism.

How true are these? Let's explore what is really the number one priority at this point and let us also judge BNP by its action in the past 4 years instead of common perception. An objective analysis will show that BNP has slowly moved so far to the right in the past 4 years that the moderate voters have to question their true ideology. The burden of proof is on BNP now to prove otherwise by its actions. Perhaps it is high time to ask, specially the voters of Bangladesh, that whether rooting out of the militants is possible with the current government in power. Now that it is finally clear that who was responsible for all the bombings in the past 6 years, it is time to look forward to a solution to this menace and also to look back and trace back the government actions and hold them accountable for what they said and did and make an honest judgment on whether this government is capable of finding a solution to this problem. Although, the militant attacks started since 1999, it took a more direct and lethal shape since 2003. Government's approach to any kind of fundamentalist threats were one of appeasement. To be more precise, the government's actions about the militant activities can be broken down in three categories. Denials, appeasement & mis investigations and passive encouragement. Let's explore each of these three in details.

Denials: “*Bangla bhai is a creation of the media*” - Nijami

Until February of 2005, and that too after intense pressure from the EU, who were reviewing their aid and connected it with government's HR record, government of Bangladesh did not admit the existence of Islamic extremists. Any talk of extremism was met with a vicious tirade comparing the accusers of conspiring to tarnish the image of Bangladesh to the outside world. State minister for home is on record telling BBC radio on January 26th this year:

"We don't know officially about the existence of the JMJB. Only some so-called newspapers are publishing reports on it. We don't have their constitution in our record," Making the comment to the BBC radio, Babar, on government's inaction to arrest Bangla Bhai, said, "I oppose very strongly that our ministry has failed to take action, because we are still trying. How would we arrest anyone if he is absent physically or not available?"

The government first denied Bangla Bhai's existence, then said they did not find him. Even Prime Minister Khaleda Zia herself, while exchanging views with editors in August last year, said there is no existence of Bangla Bhai. Ruling coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer and Industries Minister Matiur Rahman Nizami on July 22 last year said, "Bangla Bhai was created by some newspapers."

He also accused newspapers of having links with Bangla Bhai. "If they (newspapers) do not have any relations with him (Bangla Bhai) then how do they publish exclusive interview of Bangla Bhai," the Jamaat ameer told a press conference. (To find more choice quotes, take a look at [this edition of Daily Star](#))

What was alarming was that government did not stop at just by making denial. They wanted to teach journalists a lesson for any talk on religious intolerance or on Al Qaida presence in Bangladesh. [In December, 2002, four journalists, two foreign and two local, were arrested and](#)

[charged with treason](#) for doing a report the rise of extremism in Bangladesh. I met two of them – Saleem Samad and Priscila Raj after their release and the story of brutal torture mitigated upon them was not of a happy ending. Saleem Samad, since then, has been in exile after repeatedly getting harassed by the government and Priscila was still going to court fighting her treason charges.

There are countless other examples where government fiercely tried to resist anyone who tried to say anything about the rise of extremism and growing religious intolerance in Bangladesh. Whether it was the ASK(HR org) officer who had two books in his possession on minority oppression or whether it was [Reuter's stringer Enamul Huq Chowdhury](#) who quoted the then information minister on Al Qaida presence in Bangladesh -- all met with arrests, treason charges and brutal tortures. Even Drishtipat has had its own share of wrath of the government. When Drishitpat sent an action alert for an open investigation after the killing of Shams Kibria, the government and some media termed it a conspiracy against Bangladesh and [threatened us with enacting cyber law to prosecute us](#). Never mind that such agility was completely missing in catching the culprits of the bombing.

Abatement and Mis investigation:

As late as November 29th, RAB arrested and released [Bangla bhai's right hand man Khamaru](#) and released him on the same day without charges due to the lobbying of a deputy minister. This has been the pattern throughout until recently. Not only the major bombing investigations were [uninvestigated \(http://stopviolence.drishtipat.org/bombing_summary.htm\)](#), they were misdirected to get to the intellectuals and the political enemies of Jamate Islami. The cinema hall blast in Mymensingh by the militants resulted, quite unbelievably, in the arrest of Shahriar Kabir and Muntasir Mamoon – a journalist and professor respectively in their fifties, known for their outspoken criticism of Islamic fundamentalism. From the stabbing of Shamsur Rahman to the slashing of Humayun Azad, each incident of attacks on intellectuals remained uninvestigated while journalist was being thrown into jail for misquoting the information minister. Apart from the misdirection of the investigation, when the perpetrators got caught, Jamaat lobbied successfully to free a lot of the arrested. Daily Star on September 22nd [published a detailed account](#) of Jamaat's involvement with the terrorists. It says:

“According to police record, over 100 militants were arrested during January-August this year in connection with the bombings, and all the arrestees either belong to Jamaat or its various wings at present or worked with them earlier.

Whenever any Jamaat or Shibir activist was arrested for militant activities, Jamaat lobbied for their release, and where they failed, they announced that the arrested militant had been expelled from the party earlier.”

Getting hint from the administration, there were deliberate attempt on the police to not follow through on any investigation properly. [Another detailed article on Government's reluctance](#) on investigating clues left by the militants leave a shocking tale. It says,

“Most militants were arrested only to be released on bail later to go ahead with their activities. In some cases, the incidents were not even investigated further.”

.....

In 2003, decoded diaries of the militants stunned the investigators with information that the outfit had training stations in 57 districts with bases at the Ahle Hadith mosques and madrasas.

"They have well-equipped training stations in all the 16 northern and some southern

districts, and small stations in other districts where they operate," the then inspector of Joypurhat Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Khalilur Rahman had told The Daily Star.

"If not taken care of properly now, the situation may go worse," apprehended some investigators who interrogated the arrested militants before and found their strong stance for not revealing anything.

The documents found with the militants so far, especially in Joypurhat, were never thoroughly examined although some of those carried minutes of the outfit's internal meetings, names of training centres, patrons and leaders."

More alarmingly clues were left untraced and case documents were getting burnt suspiciously. It was obvious, someone from inside did not want these incidents to be investigated.

The article on the first discovery of JMB says:

The JMB existence came to light on May 20, 2002 when police nabbed eight militants in Parbatipur of Dinajpur with 25 petrol bombs and documents. The eight were later released on bail and the investigation was stalled as the case documents went missing in a "mysterious" fire at the Parbatipur PS in 2003.

Passive encouragement:

The biggest crime in my mind, however, was the direct patronage of the government to the Islamic fundamentalist forces like Khatme Nabuwat. Not only the post election atrocities on the Hindu community was tolerated, it directly encouraged groups that incite violence against minority Ahmadiyas by giving into their demand of banning their publication. Repeatedly, Ahmadiya mosques around the country were vandalized with the Police watching from the sideline and sometime [lending them a helping hand](#). It was only because of an organized campaign by the Ahmadiya sect and the HR organizations, the complete declaration of Ahmadiyas as non-muslims could have been averted. After each bombing incident against the opposition party, leaders from BNP termed the incidents as set ups, making the investigation mute and emboldening the militants even more.

From the discussion above, a direct pattern of denial, abatement and appeasement of the militants is obvious, raising the question that whether tackling of this grave issue is at all possible by this government and if their credibility is damaged beyond repair. For arguments sake, if I say that the denials were made to save their collective face, what can not be just passed as incompetence or error of judgment, is the abatement, appeasement and encouragement of the fundamentalists by the Government.

As I write today, I am watching ATN Bangla news to see business community(FBCCI) has asked for unity among the political parties. I am puzzled. So what if BNP and AL seat together to meet and send a joint statement. Will this problem be resolved? Will the suicide bombers realise their crime and give up the bombing. Or is it AL has secret information about them that the government intelligent does not know? Quite contrary to that thinking, I think the number one priority lies with the Government and the party in power only. We need a solid investigation, drying out of JMB's earning sources and most importantly cleanseing out the administration from the infiltrators who are making a sincere investigation impossible. FBCCI knows better than that. Similarly, the prime minister is talking about making stringent new law to punish these people. The most stringent of the law can give them death sentence. But in case the PM did not notice, they are not waiting to get

caught. They are happily welcoming the death for the “better life”.

Based on the fact that BNP has taken no initiative to prove that they are sincere in tackling this extremism, and their government or certain part of their government has continuously misled the investigation and in some key cases deliberately let go of the perpetrators, the conventional wisdom that BNP is not a Islamic fundamentalist party is surely put on test. BNP can prove the conventional wisdom is true and turn it around from them. The Prime minister can come clean, just like she did on her last speech to the nation admitting the rise of extremism for the first time in the country and take ACTION. The principle actions that she can take are:

- Ban all religious extremist organizations like Khatme Nabuwat, Amra Dhakabashi,
- Bring Kaomi Madrassahs under sharp control of the government,
- Calling end to the alliance with Islamic Fundamentalist Jamate Islami.
- Cleanse out the extremist sympathizers from the administration and the party

Only by taking these steps, BNP can restore its credibility and ensure that total wipe out of them is averted in the coming election. This will also enable opposition to join in and together in a unified voice it may be the first step to crush this mindless lunacy of suicide bombing. But for the time being before talking about unity among political parties, we need to admit that the ball is squarely on the court of BNP, in order for them to make the next move. If this does not happen, then there are enough reasons to believe that what happened in the last four years inside the government in the name of dealing with extremists were calculated and deliberate. Perhaps then, we would need to stop giving BNP the rain check after all this time and not treat them any differently than any other right wing fundamentalist religious party in the mold of Jamaat.