
Countering terrorism

Siamul Huq Rabbany Published at 07:31 PM September 23, 2016
Last updated at 07:43 PM September 23, 2016



Ensuring peace and engaging change makers in Bangladesh (Part 2 of 2)

We are now experiencing a shift in terrorist activities and the way they operate. The new threats of terrorism that have emerged also requires a shift in the efforts to fight them, from the current reactive hard power approach to a more inclusive proactive people-oriented model. So far we have only been focusing on the 'who' factor, but the time has come to also study, examine and understand the 'how' factor. This is not only important to understand how new recruits are becoming radicalised, but to understand how to stop the growth of a conducive environment in which extremism can thrive. To win the war against terrorism comprehensively, elements that are conducive to the spread of violent ideologies must be eliminated, and engaging citizens as part of counter terrorism efforts is an integral part of this.

Engaging young citizens is crucial

Bangladesh saw a phenomenal rise in militancy last year, with the highest number of accused militants since 2005, with police records putting the number of accused at 597. From 2006 onwards, the government was able to curb extremist activities, mainly through the hard power approach by law enforcement agencies. However, the recent Holey Artisan attack has brought a new dynamics to the extremist activities in Bangladesh as well as raised serious concerns about the usual counter terrorism methods employed in Bangladesh.

While there is no doubt that the traditional reactive approach is necessary to counter terrorism, the empowerment and engagement of citizens is also necessary, especially since the extremist groups are using online tools and other resources to radicalise vulnerable people and raise the sense of insecurity among the people of this country. The recent attacks on minorities and the rise of new JMB are the best examples of how they have changed their strategies and operational tactics to increase the number of their supporters.

It is evident that the terrorists are adapting in the modern world to ensure their survival.

However, one thing remains the same even within the changing dynamics – they are targeting vulnerable young citizens of Bangladesh. We now see a shift from recruiting in madrasas to English medium schools, public and private universities and universities abroad, but they are all young people who could have easily been future leaders in our society. The only solution to this worrying trend is the long term solution – a wide range of measures to educate our citizens and increase awareness about extremist ideologies, particularly among the youth, regardless of their social status, culture or education.

Youth as partners in peace

Last December, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security to recognise the potential of youth leadership. The resolution recognises the critical role of youth in promoting and maintaining peace, and calls for all communities to emphasise on young people as critical partners for peace.

The time has come when we need to engage our citizens in the decision-making process against extremism, and in this process, the young population of our country can play a great role. We need to utilise the potential our young people have by involving them at both local and national levels. We consider the younger generations to be future leaders of the nation, but unfortunately it is these generations who are most vulnerable to extremism. If we do not protect our future leaders from this threat, we will collectively fail to shape a better future for all of us.

Young people are already a very important social force in our country, and they have an important role to play in social development, and establishing our values and culture for the future. The terrorist groups want to take advantage of this force, and manipulate social, economical, cultural, religious and psychological issues to use them as a source of propaganda. By doing so, they not only change the young people's attitudes and behaviours through their ideologies; at the same time they penetrate their perception of the world and ensure that their only desire is the group's targets and desires.

But have we done enough to protect our young populations from these risks, and give them enough opportunities to bring concrete changes in society? We have to empower our youth and women, promote community engagement, strengthen local actors and improve the capacities of media and educational institutions to counter radicalising ideologies in the long term. There is a gap between considering our young as next generation leaders and providing them with the tools to achieve this, and the extremist groups are very strategically exploiting this vacuum.

Involving young people in day-long campaigns against terrorism or giving them lectures on counter narratives is not going to solve this problem in the long run, unless we constructively engage them as change makers who will decide the future of this country. We urgently need a long-term people-oriented strategy to counter radicalism and terrorism.

The writer is the CEO and Co-Founder of Bangladesh Initiative for Sustainable Future (BISF) and can be reached at rabbany.siamul@bisf.org.bd