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How to stop the spread of extremism in Bangladesh

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In Act 2 of his play Othello, the English bard William Shakespeare, or rather, his character Iago, says of “reputation” that “it is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving”. His interlocutor in this case was Cassio, an individual. But this profound sentiment is perhaps as equally apt for individuals as it is for peoples.

In Singapore recently, the uncovering of the evidence of potential extremist acts by 27 Bangladeshi workers and their resultant deportation threatened to strain the reputation of the Bangladeshi community. The Singapore political leadership, including Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, acted swiftly, urging calm with appropriate assurances, and, happily, no feathers were ruffled and no harm was done.

The societal harmony that Singapore is known for remained undis-

turbed, as all communities here continued their preparations for the celebrations of the upcoming Chinese New Year.

Nevertheless, as this event recedes into the background (the ball now being in the court of Bangladeshi authorities, who are undertaking their own investigations), an analysis of the realities that pervade the polity of the mother-country of the alleged perpetrators of violent extremism would be worthwhile.

Bangladesh, the world’s eighth-largest country, comprises 160 million people. It is not often in the news, though sometimes the pervasive political volatility and the vicissitudes of nature find media attention. What does not usually capture global focus is the story of this nation’s quiet achievements of women’s empowerment and gender equality, of enhanced female education and reduced child mortality, of its high intellectual standards and its vibrant civil society, of its immense garment industry that has fetched it US\$29.6 billion (S\$41.5 billion) just this past year, of it being the United Nations’ largest peacekeeper in Africa

and elsewhere, and of its functioning, albeit tumultuous, democracy.

Slowly but surely over the decades, it has proved Kissinger’s description of it being a “basket case” wrong. Still poor and struggling, its development story is that of growth with equity. Its social indices are better than those of many states of neighbouring India. The World Bank has called Bangladesh a “paradox”. Some Bangladeshis with a somewhat inflated, though not totally unreasonable, perception of themselves see it as a “paradigm”.

PROGRESS AND RELIGIOSITY

The Bangladesh Finance Minister MA Muhith, on Sept 16, 2015, unveiled a report in Dhaka that recorded the progress made towards the achievement of the targets set by the UN in the form of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It showed marked progress in the areas of poverty alleviation, primary-school enrolment, gender parity in primary and secondary education, and lowering of infant-mortality rates.

The Minister was confident that poverty could be eradicated by 2030, which is also the essence of the UN’s current Sustainable Development Goals. Corruption remains a persistent bane, and tackling it is an endeavour the government is engaged in, not always with success. Indeed, it was allegations of financial wrong-doings

that led the World Bank to withdraw funds from the planned Padma Bridge, purported to link the two halves of the country. But Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina displayed remarkable fiscal courage and a striking political chutzpah by going ahead with its construction, mobilising alternative resources.

The buoyant garment manufacturing sector has also been plagued by setbacks, including the collapse of a factory called Rana Plaza that killed nearly 1,000 workers, but the government is desperately seeking to correct negative perceptions by initiating necessary “compliance measures”.

But, alas, as it is bound to happen with regard to Muslim-majority countries in today’s world, global interest is unfortunately less focused on the development aspects than on how religiosity, or the nature and practice of Islam, plays out in the political and social space.

Most Bangladeshis, 85 to 90 per cent, are Bengali Muslims who have two attributes: “Bengaliness” and “Muslimness”. This is the great national dichotomy. Sometimes the two elements coexist within the individual as well, one at times overwhelming the other. “Muslimness” is the defining identity that distinguishes the Bangladeshi from the Indian (though this analogy cannot be taken too far because there is also a Hindu Bangladeshi, albeit a minority), and “Bengaliness” separates him or her from

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norities. Exceptions may not prove the rule, but concerted and determined action would be necessary — not a state of denial — so that the situation never develops that they become the rule themselves.

Bangladesh undeniably is a country of huge potential. Goldman Sachs has placed it in the list of the so-called Next Eleven, using criteria such as macroeconomic stability, political maturity, openness of trade, investment policies and quality of education.

Along with the BRICs, the Next Eleven have the capabilities of developing into the world's largest economies in the 21st century. But any case of societal instability, as through the spread of violent extremism, could unravel these prospects.

What will be required is a united front, a joining of hands, a closing of ranks, by the disparate political forces and civil society, and the institutions of the state — the executive, the judiciary, the police and the military — to

prevent any such disruptions.

Despite the reported incidents, of all Muslim-majority states, Bangladesh is still the least penetrated by violent extremism. True, the world, Bangladesh included, is in a state of flux. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus had observed that one never steps into the same river twice. Bangladesh, too, is like a flowing stream, and it is up to its leadership, indeed its people, to ensure that it flows along the right direction.

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the Pakistanis. These two streams eventually, and largely, found expression in the two major political parties, the Awami League led by Ms Hasina, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) headed by Begum Khaleda Zia.

This, of course, is a rough analogy, but one that sufficiently explains the bitterness as reflecting the acrimony that marks the relationship between the two defining attributes cited earlier. History demonstrates that stability depends on the ability to maintain equilibrium between the two attributes. Any imbalance would cause conflict. The restoration of stability would be dependent on the correction of that imbalance, including by the complete preponderance of one value system over the other, though a more balanced approach would have greater sustainability.

By tradition, the Islam practised in Bangladesh has been syncretic, which tends to make the adherents, both those by choice or birth, moderate and tolerant. The predominant cultural and philosophical roots are sufistic imbuing spiritual pluralism. The State has encouraged this, as have much of Bangladesh's large and influential civil society, and an embodiment of a policy reflection of this fact was the naming of Dhaka's airport, the largest symbol of entry into the country, after a great Sufi saint of Sylhet, Hazrat Shahjalal, an original propagator of Islam in this land. But this overwhelming majority is not insular and, therefore, not immune from other influences.

Increasing globalisation has doubtless brought benefits, but there is also a flip side of this coin. It has also led to greater exposure to the Wahabism and Salafism as obtained in the Gulf region of the Middle East, both through physical contact as by the millions of workers abroad, and burgeoning technological capabilities, which translates into increasing access to the Internet and, thereby, enhanced vulnerability to powerful extremist propaganda. This explains the incidents such as the killing of secular bloggers and a number of foreigners, and the recent attacks on the Shia mi-

Men looking at the photographs of 27 Bangladeshi nationals suspected of planning extremist activities. The uncovering of the evidence of potential acts threatened to strain the reputation of the Bangladeshi community.

TODAY FILE PHOTO

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