

DHAKA STREET

## Army of 71 or Army of Islam

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THE BANGLADESH ARMY, ON January 19, declared in a press conference that a possible coup attempt had been foiled last month. Dhaka has had a shave with destabi-lization of the elected government. How close the shave was, one might not know soon—especially because the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) government, quite predictably, has seized this opportunity to bolster its image, which had taken a serious beating in the last one-year, as evidenced from the results of the local body elections. Already from certain AL quarters, there are allegations being thrown about the involvement of the principal opposition group, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the coup attempt. According to the Bangladesh army press brief, the main players in the coup attempt were “some non-resident Bangladeshis” and “some retired and serving army officers with fanatical religious views”. Specifically an Islamic fundamentalist organization with branches world over including Bangladesh, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HUT), has been implicated.

This eastern part of Bengal has seen successful and unsuccessful coups in the past. The last such unsuccessful coup was partly a standoff between the president and Chief of Army Staff and then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on the other. While both General Zia-ur-Rahman and General Ershad were beneficiaries of a coup, their immediately loyal constituency does not exist in the Army as it did some decades ago. In spite of the AL allegation, it is unlikely that the top echelons of the BNP had any systematic collective role in the purported coup attempt last month. During the soft-coup by Moin U Ahmed, under the garb of the caretaker government, both AL and BNP leaders had been tortured.

Extremely active in certain mosques of London’s east end, a Bangladeshi hub, the HUT also enjoys considerable support in Malaysia and Indonesia, two countries with large Bangladeshi immigrant populations. Hence, it is not surprising that certain nodes of the alleged conspiracy point to these places of HUT presence. However, the fertile reception of the toxic, anti-democratic ideology of the HUT in the Bangladeshi army can be partially traced back to the Zia and Ershad years when under their programme of *conscious Islamization* of the Bangaldeshi polity and state institutions, the army was one of the first institutions where this was carried out. It has been a slow process. It is not easy to transform the Army of 71 into the Army of Islam. Neither has such a complete transformation happened. What cannot be denied is that some of the young captains and lieutenants who were recruited in the Bangladesh army during the Zia-Ershad years of Islami-zation are now Colonels, Brigadiers and other higher-ups. The Junior Commanding Officers (JCO) of the units have also grown up with them. They have grown up in a period when a not so veiled communal discourse ran rife in official circles of East Bengal. In addition to realpolitik, this ideological bent might have the biggest potential to bring down the

elected government. The people of Bangladesh have never voted overwhelmingly for staunch Islamic groups. Their leaders and people of influence though have quite willingly allied themselves with illegitimate governments of Zia and Ershad. Much of the BNP and Jatiyo Party top brass are essentially erstwhile civilian collaborators of illegitimate martial administrations, be it that of Zia or Ershad. Even during the dangerous flirtation with the caretaker government, many civilian leaders sent not so covert signals that they would have to have an extended honeymoon with the unelected dispensation.

That the Bangladesh Jatiyo Sangshad (parliament) is largely dysfunctional does help matters and only serves to alienate certain sections of the opposition spectrum into finding ways of securing change, as they would like to see it, via roads that run opposite to that of an elected national assembly. The BNP has done a marathon boycott of the Jatiyo Sangshad. They can claim that the AL had done the same when BNP was in power. There is more than a grain of truth in that allegation. The physical absence of the BNP in the Sangshad as well as the small number of seats the BNP holds anyway may give the AL leadership a false sense of an overwhelming majority. Recent BNP street mobilizations and their win in local body elections show that they clearly represent much more than what their Sangshad strength might suggest. AL's ham-handed suppression of opposition political rallies will only serve to delink certain fringe elements of the opposition from open street politics to conspiratorial politics that has its own discreet charm. □□□