

Essay

SMART URBAN GOVERNANCE IN NEW AGE TERRORISM: THE LESSONS OF MUMBAI

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Abstract

The unprecedented terror attacks in Mumbai by highly motivated militants armed with sophisticated weapons on November 26, 2008 dramatically demonstrated the susceptibility of modern cities to terrorist attacks. This essay, by using the Mumbai attack as a test case, argues that there is a strong relationship between the quality of urban governance institutions and the number of terrorist attacks and their resultant casualties. Therefore, there is a strong need to make urban government institutions more credible, worthy and smart in fighting terror against cities.

Introduction: The unprecedented terror attacks in Mumbai by highly motivated militants armed with sophisticated weapons on November 26, 2008 dramatically demonstrated the susceptibility of modern cities to terrorist attacks. Although terrorists have attacked New York (2001), Washington D.C (2001), Madrid (2004), and London (2005), the Mumbai assault has proved that cities in the developing world experience terrorist acts with greater frequency and often with more devastating effect than in economically advanced countries. One major reason for this is the lack of effective urban governance institutions in many developing countries. Using the experience of Mumbai, this essay argues that there is a strong relationship between the quality of urban governance institutions and the number of terrorist attacks and casualties.

Therefore, there is a strong need to make urban governance institutions more credible, worthy and smart in fighting terrorism against cities.

This essay, in the above backdrop, is divided into three parts: the first part discusses the main elements of terrorism and mentions how the 'new age terrorism' differs from the old one, the second part explores why terrorists target urban centres, the final part analyses the importance of smart urban governance in new age terrorism with a special focus on Mumbai.

Understanding Terrorism: While examining the incidence of terrorism in urban centres, it is important to understand the meaning of terrorism. J. Barker (2003, p.24) has mentioned three main elements of terrorism: 'a) violent acts threatened or employed b) violent acts directed against civilian targets and c) violent acts threatened or perpetrated for political objectives'. Unlike some other characterizations, this definition embraces acts of terror committed by states because although state terrorism and group terrorism have different features, their effects on people and politics are similar and they are often closely related. The close connection between the Pakistani Army and its intelligence agency called the Inter-Services Intelligence and the Pakistan based deadly terrorist organisations such as the *Jaish-e-Mohammad* and the *Lashkar-e-Toiba* (widely believed to have masterminded the recent Mumbai attacks) is a case in point.

It is also important to mention that while terrorism is not a new phenomenon; some aspects of terrorist activity today are certainly new. Brian Michael Jenkins (2006, p.185) has identified the following features of the 'New Age Terrorism'. 'First, terrorism has become bloodier. Second, terrorists have developed new financial resources so that they are less dependent on state sponsors. Third, terrorists have evolved new models of organization. Fourth, terrorists can now wage global campaigns. Fifth, terrorists have effectively exploited new communication technologies. Sixth, some terrorists have moved beyond tactics to strategy, although none of them have achieved their stated long-range goals'. Finally, 'terrorists ignore existing global norms, especially those intended to protect innocent civilians' (Mansbach & Rafferty, 2008, p.339).

Why Terrorists Target Urban Areas? After discussing the main elements and the features of new age terrorism, it is important to ask: why urban centres have become the targets of the terrorist onslaught? In fact, all the 15 major previous terrorist attacks in India have taken place in cities. New Age Terrorists are rational in the choice of their targets because urban landscape holds significant advantages for them. Population is not only high in urban areas but also dense. Inhabitants in cities and towns are more heterogeneous that gives terrorists more space for anonymity. For terrorists, logistical support like arms, medicines, food and lodging are readily available in an average urban area. Maneuverability of terrorists is guaranteed by the presence of transportation facilities that are both dependable and unobstructive. In urban areas, a terrorist group may find it easier to recruit terrorists in a predictable manner, for it is the city that nurtures dissidence in general. Cities host iconic buildings and high profile symbolic targets. By attacking them, the terrorists wish to make a point that “Your government can not protect you. No place is safe”. This undermines the credibility of the government. Since the quality and quantity of the terrorist’s ‘defined enemy’ is high in cities, the impact of the destructive act is more widespread. This also gives an added advantage to the terrorists to prevent any kind of indiscriminate counter-terrorist operation by the state that could maximise collateral damage.

Urban operations for the terrorists also often demand less in the way of brute physical strength and endurance than do operations in mountainous or rural terrain. And they do not need sophisticated, long-range weapons to inflict the desired damage. The attention seeking goal of the terrorists is well served in the urban environment where the immediate audience is greatest and where representatives of the print and electronic media are available and quite eager to report. Such wide coverage makes it clear that “terrorists feed not on the deaths of their victims but also on the fear of those left behind”. Thus the urban landscape facilitates terrorists in realising their goals: “maximum damage with minimum risk, hyper media attention and subsequent disappearances” (Manoharan, 2009).

Although terror has stalked India all too often but the Mumbai attack was different for several reasons. First, the Mumbai terrorist attack is described one of the deadliest

and biggest terror attacks India has ever seen and rightly dubbed as India's 9/11. 'The bloody drama which involved attacks in as many as 11 places in the city left 183 people, including 22 foreigners, dead. It took a force of 477 National Security Guards personnel, six columns of the Army and 400 members of the Mumbai police to kill or conquer an estimated 10 men in a 60 hours operation' (Katakam, 2008, p.6). Secondly, for the first time, the terrorist attacked an Indian urban centre by using the sea route starting from Karachi via Gujarat to Mumbai. This was done to avoid Indian security check points at the frontier or at airports. Third, the attacks in Mumbai are without precedent. For the past decade, terrorist attacks have either been large scale coordinated attacks like the 9/11 or the London bombings or they have been single suicide bombings like the ones frequently seen in Israel. Mumbai attack straddles the line between the two types of attacks. Finally, with the Mumbai attack, pan-Islamist forces have brought their global jihad against the USA, Britain and Israel into the heart of India. This was evident especially when they targeted the Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels that are the preferred choice of many European, American and Israeli visitors and business travelers. Terrorists now see India as part of the "Crusaders (the USA and the West)-Zionists (Israel)-Hindu (India) axis that they believe, have joined hands to destroy Islam.

What could be the possible motives of those who targeted Mumbai? A good hypothesis is that the terrorists wanted to provoke India into a military retaliation, similar to its Parliament's attack in 2001. This would furnish Pakistan with an excuse for redeploying its troops currently stationed near the Afghan border easing pressure on *Taliban/AI Qaida* militants and allowing them time to regroup. A second motive was to bring the dangerous clash of civilization thesis to its denouement and create tension between India's majority Hindus and minority Muslims resulting in a deadly communal bloodshed between the two communities. Finally, this kind of attack on India's financial capital (the city contributes about 40 % India's GDP) is intended to send the message that India is not safe place to do business. The Indian economy and its links with the world are under attack.

The Lessons of Mumbai: The Mumbai terror attacks have brought the short-comings inherent in most urban governments in the developing countries: the gap between the

promise of public service and its delivery that lies at the root of their inability to respond swiftly and effectively to the challenge of terrorism that has appeared in their cities with horrifying regularity. Mumbai is the best case. The city as the country's financial and business center has always been an obvious target for terrorists and terrorist assaults have been occurring in the city with a distressing frequency in the recent past. For instance, in March 1993, simultaneous attacks on a number of targets resulted in over 270 fatal casualties. Similarly, the multiple bomb blasts on Mumbai trains killed 200 people in July 2005. Yet the city administration has miserably failed to develop the right kind of infrastructure or has any crisis management protocols in place to deal with the frequent terrorist onslaught. This was demonstrated in the November 2008 terrorist attack.

The terrorists were able to inflict severe casualties in Mumbai because the city police, the first responders, did not engage them. Their weapons were not sufficiently powerful and they were not trained in that type of conflict. Moreover, the city firemen were slow to respond. They failed to coordinate their actions with both the local police and national paramilitary forces and suffered from inadequate equipment.

Similarly, Mumbai, with 18 million people and the fourth largest Metropolitan region in the world, did not even have a single Special Weapons and Tactics Team nor a helicopter to carry SWAT teams sent from New Delhi to Mumbai. The commandos who ended the siege had to wait for hours to be transported from the Mumbai airport. The terrorists had hotel floor plans, but the commandos did not; terrorists used GPS & Blackberries and monitored news coverage, while the commandos did not have advanced communications. Terrorists even monitored civilian cellphone and text message traffic to glean information about what the police were doing.

Sadly, during the attack, there was no powerful official representing Mumbai city's administration simply because the administration has no power to speak of. The responses in the immediate aftermath of the attacks---orders to the police and military, evacuation operations---flowed from the above. 'An entire tier of the government at the local level was non-existent' (Nilekani, 2008).

Now compare that with America. New York City, like the rest of the USA, prides itself that it has been able to prevent another terrorist attack after 9/11. A key factor that has helped is the effort put in by its police force to anticipate threats and try and stay one step ahead of potential attackers. Moreover, the way the city administration had responded to the 9/11 terrorist strike is also praiseworthy. Rudy Giuliani, the New York mayor, was highly visible in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and coordinated the response of various city departments while organizing the support of state and federal authorities for the attack site, for city-wide anti-terrorist measures, and for restoration of destroyed infrastructure. He made frequent appearances on radio and television on September 11 and afterwards and was hailed by many for his leadership role during the crisis.

Unlike New York, Mumbai's problems are deeply structural. Although the 74th constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 formally gave constitutional recognition to urban governance in India, decision-making on financial and governance matters concerning the city is split in a haphazard manner within the country's three tiered structure of governance (Federal, State and the City Government). This results in a diffused responsibility, lack of coordinated action and disjointed planning as well as lack of financial autonomy for the city. Ironically, even municipal services in cities are fragmented across many different corporations, agencies and local government bodies resulting in what can be called "too many cooks in the urban kitchen" scenario with conflicting lines of accountability. What is more painful is that the city mayors in India largely hold ceremonial positions. Their indirect election combined with short-one year tenure deprives them with any real authority. And all this had repercussions in the speed and efficiency with which Mumbai responded to the attacks.

Besides revealing the serious deficiencies of urban governance system in India, the Mumbai attack also showed the larger mood of anger and disappointment of the public against the political class whether they occupied governing slots in New Delhi or Mumbai and remains satisfied with its minimalist performance. Within days of the terrorist attack, billboards were set up in the city with messages that are worthy to mention; that the political class has failed us, so please do not vote (those who come in

through our vote are more dangerous than those Pakistanis who came through the boat), 'no security, no taxes' etc. Some have even filled public interest litigation against the government charging that it failed to discharge its constitutional duty to protect the country's citizenry and uphold their right to life.

It is understandable that the public that feels it deserves better insists on some semblance of accountability and responsive governance from those who claim to represent and speak for the 'masses'. But it is also worth mentioning that the questioning of the process of elections-the very exercise that is fundamental to democracy and the erosion of the people's faith in democratic institutions has serious implications. It could not only embolden the authoritarian figures and their anti-democratic ambitions but might end up with no institution retaining credibility or respectability to stand up to the practitioners of violence. While anger can replace governments with another, it does not bring change. This can come through the democratic process. With all its distortions, there is no alternative to democracy and elections.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, following conclusions may be drawn.

- Terrorism will for the foreseeable future be an urban phenomenon and big urban centres are likely most at risk due to their locations and the high impact of targeting them.
- The terrorist is a mercenary on a mission. His strategy is low tech with high impact. He will always search for gaps in the system and cause mass causality. The Mumbai experience shows that while weak urban institutions are a sure recipe for more terrorist attacks and increasing casualties, strong and effective institutions have certainly a deterring effect both on terrorist strikes and their consequent fatalities.
- Little can be achieved unless every aspect of governance is brought up to par. For instance, first rate commandos can not fight terrorism with a third-rate fire

brigade. Similarly, the national investigative and security agencies will not make any difference if ordinary city policemen remain untrained and underequipped and if intelligence gathering at the level of local police station remains abysmal. So it is vital to provide regular training to the city police and equip them with right kind of weapons.

- The increasing frequency of terror attacks and the institutional inability to counter them could seriously undermine the people's faith in democratic institutions and those who run those institutions. So in order to restore people's faith in public institutions, the political class should take urgent measures to increase their delivery capacity and to make these institutions more credible, worthy and smart to successfully face the terrorist challenge.

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Declaration: *The essay submitted is my own work whose name appears on the front page as the author and I have appropriately referenced any parts taken from other sources in this essay.*