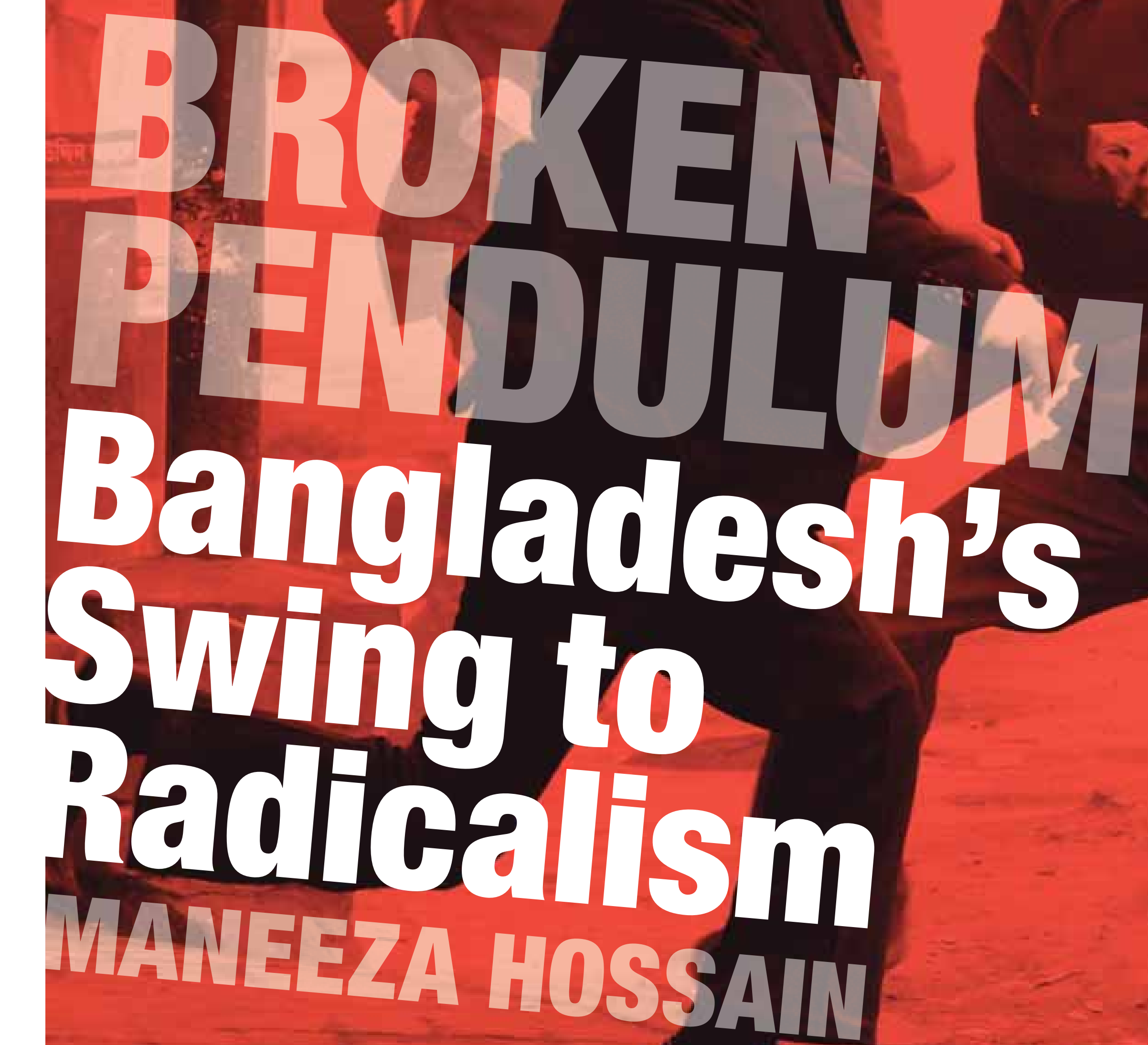
BROKEN PENDULUM

Bangladesh's Swing to Radicalism

MANEEZA HOSSAIN



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by Maneeza Hossain

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CENTER ON ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND
THE FUTURE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Introduction

In 2007, Bangladesh was supposed to hold its fourth democratic election since the restoration of representative government in 1990. Instead, 2007 will enter the annals of Bangladeshi history as the year in which the country experienced its third episode of military rule.

This book, conceived long before the takeover of the political system by the Bangladeshi Armed Forces on January 11, 2007, was intended to address the long-term challenges to the culture and practice of democracy in this young South Asian nation. While the post-takeover reality introduces a multitude of new factors, some of which intensify and some of which work against previous trends, the fact is that the challenges to Bangladeshi democracy remain essentially the same. The new reality has merely reshuffled many issues; it would be as dangerous to consider this new episode of military rule in Bangladesh a panacea for the nation's troubles as it would be reckless to call it an ill that supersedes all other ills.

The problems that have afflicted Bangladesh over the three and a half decades of its existence as a nation-state are both endemic and structural. Bangladeshi culture has never resolved the dilemma of whether its two basic constituents, Bengali nationalism and Islam, are compatible. Nor has the Bangladeshi polity developed a lasting institutional framework that allows the citizen to place his or her trust in the system as opposed to dynastic politics. The rising entrepreneurial class, which was born out of a virtual tabula rasa, has been a driving force for the country's economic development but also, unchecked, has helped to make corruption a permanent fixture of Bangladeshi politics. The regional confrontation—at times open and at times more discreet—between India and Pakistan has consistently found a convenient battlefield in Bangladesh. Arms trade, local intrigues, and laundered-money flow have fueled a cycle of clandestine arms shipments through Bangladesh towards rebels fighting in New Delhi. A dynamic civil society movement has scored universally notable successes, but it has in some respects also detached itself from the seemingly mundane concerns of the local populace. Finally, while the Bangladeshi armed forces have undergone a process of professionalization that has elevated them to the status of a world-class, trustworthy institution, the price for this development seems to be their establishment of a rentier arrangement with the United Nations.

Against the backdrop of these problems, a global resurgence of Islamism in its many forms, from the social democratic to the radical Jihadist, has been taking place. The international political climate has been affected not only by dramatic events like the September 11 attacks, but also by long-term developments such as the concentration and redistribution of oil wealth—and these in turn have influenced the interplay of local Bangladeshi trends. When Bangladeshi

laborers, a mainstay of the construction boom in the new globalized economy, return home from jobs in the Persian Gulf, they introduce into Bangladesh both ideas and assets from the outside. These are influencing the evolution of many facets of Bangladeshi life, whether immediately or incrementally.

This monograph describes the dialectical interaction between the factors mentioned above and assesses the current challenges that face democracy in Bangladesh. It offers a series of recommendations for helping Bangladesh become a stable, prosperous, democratic nation. It relies on the considerable body of scholarship that has been generated in Bangladesh and abroad, on comparative approaches to the South Asian region and the rest of the world, and on original inquiries and research that I conducted over the past two years, both in Bangladesh and in other relevant locations.

The book is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter 1, "Pendulum Swings and the Birth of Bangladesh," describes the two main components of Bangladeshi identity, Bengali nationalism and Islam. It explores the history of their interplay in the region and looks at the pendulum swing that has again made religion a major element in Bangladeshi politics, specifically in the context of Islamism's growth worldwide.

Chapter 2, "Factors in the Evolution of the Bangladeshi Polity," explores various movements (socialist, nationalist, religious) against the rise of the new economic elite in Bangladesh, and examines how this elite has moderated ideologies, fostered development, and contributed to corruption. It considers corruption as a delegitimizing factor in Bangladeshi politics and explores corruption's origins and evolution as well as actions to counter it.

Chapter 3, "Ascendancy of Religion in Politics," explores the process of cultural radicalization instituted in Bangladesh by the Islamists; it identifies their targets and methods as well as the responses of the major political movements.

Chapter 4, "Islamist Agendas—A Blueprint for the Future," surveys the methods used by Islamists in Bangladesh in seeking to control society and identifies these methods as not specifically Islamic. It also argues that the "moderate" Jamaate contributes to the worst harm caused by the more extreme Islamists.

Chapter 5, "The New Order and Islamism," discusses the effect of the January 11, 2007, takeover on the prospects for the Islamist agenda in Bangladesh. It looks at how the actions of the interim government are inadvertently legitimizing and/or strengthening Islamist tendencies.

Chapter 6, "Recommendations for Reform and Policy Implications," recommends six steps that leaders can take towards resolving the most pressing of Bangladesh's challenges. It also explores whether and how the discrepancy between the deliberate planning of the Islamists and the shorter-term pragmatist approach of other groups can be resolved.

Chapter 7, "Towards a Proactive Strategy with an International Dimension," provides a framework for that addressing Bangladesh's problems that underlines the role of Bangladesh's political parties as well as the international community in general and the U.S. in particular.

When I began my research for this analysis, the Bangladeshi military figured as one element in the complex configuration to be examined and assessed. I could not have anticipated that the military would become the main player in Bangladeshi politics. Similarly, future events in Bangladesh may be influenced by new players and factors, or by established ones that take on a new importance. Still, it is my contention that the long-term structural challenges facing Bangladesh are identifiable and have remained largely constant. The risks and pitfalls of cultural radicalization, notably in the current global atmosphere, constitute one such challenge. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the dynamic through which one major component of Bangladeshi political culture, i.e., politicized Islam, can affect the future course of this precarious republic.[1]

I am indebted to numerous individuals and institutions in Bangladesh and abroad for the valuable information and support they have provided. Naturally the responsibility for all arguments, opinions, and omissions in this analysis remains mine.

chapter one

Pendulum Swings and the Birth of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a small country of about 150,000 square kilometers located in the eastern flank of South Asia, between India, the Bay of Bengal, and Myanmar (Burma). With nearly 150 million people, Bangladesh has one of the highest population densities in the world; if smaller countries and city-states are discounted, it indeed has the highest density.

History and geography have not been generous with this land. On most economic and development indicators Bangladesh ranks near the very bottom, and has suffered recurrent famine and destructive sporadic flooding. Yet its inhabitants have learned to cope remarkably well.

In the twenty-first century, Bangladesh faces an uncertain future. Dire predictions about the effects of global warming suggest that most of its land will be submerged by the rising sea level, leading to an exodus of its many millions across borders near and far. On the other hand, with a plentiful supply of energy in the form of natural gas and staple food in the form of rice, Bangladesh is equipped to achieve both energy and food sufficiency and to build a surplus towards prosperity.

As dramatic as the economic and demographic problems facing Bangladesh seem to be, it is the risk of political failure that presents the most acute danger facing this nation. In turn, the stability of this political system is itself conditional on the productive negotiation between the two main constituents of Bangladeshi identity, namely Bengali culture (and its derivative nationalism) and the Islamic faith (and its politicized offshoot).

Conventional narratives may present Bangladesh in terms of a static, subdued society that has been changed from the outside. But Bangladeshi historiography will undergo the gradual deconstruction of this narrative and its replacement by one that is more in harmony with facts, rather than the perception of the external other.

Choosing an Identity

The land that is today Bangladesh was a frontier land. Marginal populations who refused to submit to the heavy hand of empire, or who sought a subsistence space in remote, virgin

areas, haphazardly settled along the advancing deltas at the confluence of some of the Indian subcontinent's major rivers. The coalescence of a Bengali cultural identity and the appropriation of the Islamic tenets of faith were long, parallel processes that evolved in an organic harmony. Only with British rule over India and the ensuing effort at creating a "Hindu" original tradition for the locale do some fault lines start to appear in Bengali culture, and then only in high culture. For the toiling villagers at the banks of the rivers of this land, these fault lines were an abstraction with no consequence. But a century-long effort by the colonizers to polarize the population along religious lines, coupled with the emergence of competing regional interests between East and West Bengal, sifted the fused cultural elements and pushed the Muslims of Bengal to a choice of identity.

In 1947 that choice was Pakistan, as the state for the Muslim nation of India. In 1971, after almost two-and-a-half decades of colonial rule by their Punjabi and Sindhi West Pakistani brethren, Bengal's Muslims were ready for a new choice. This was not a repudiation of Islamic identity; instead, it was an affirmation of the organic local one. Still, the fault lines that had opened up more than a century ago in high culture were evident now in two competing propositions for the Bangladeshi citizen: Muslim first or Bengali first.

In 1971, these propositions amounted to a choice between siding with the Pakistani army or against it. For most of the people in the land that would become Bangladesh, the choice was not about ideological options: it was about self and society. It was also influenced by their choice of a leader, the charismatic Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was the powerhouse behind the drive leading to the 1971 independence of Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib might have had socialist ambitions, composed and confirmed a secularist constitution, and gathered the support of ideological intellectuals. But the overwhelming majority of the citizenry was indifferent to these facts when they backed him, and their support for him did not represent a rejection of their Islamic culture and background. They were attracted to his personality, his eloquence, and his self-confidence, and thus gave him the support that enabled him to steer the lost ship that was East Pakistan to the safe shores of independence.

But in adopting the ideology of his Indian and Soviet allies, Sheikh Mujib further polarized the country, driving his opponents to try to devalue Bengali culture and to elevate the status of religion in public life. This shift was subtle and most evident in high culture, and it might have remained irrelevant to a Bangladeshi society that was comfortable in both its culture and religion. But ideological Islamists with intellectual roots outside of the country saw an opportunity in Bangladesh, where over the course of three and half decades the political class had routinely abused the system. Appealing to public dissatisfaction with elected officials' dishonesty, they offered Islamism as an alternative to corrupt secularism and as a return to the traditions of the land.

The Movement Towards Islam

Over the last century political culture in what is now Bangladesh has swung like a pendulum between Islam and Bengali nationalism, the two main constituents of the people's identity. The novelty in the last few decades since independence is that the movement towards Islam has been intensified by the interplay of two factors: the corrosion of democratic politics, and the emergence of a global Islamism.

The first factor, the corrosion of democratic politics, can be seen in the wanton abuse of the political system by "democratic" politicians and in the lack of any checks and balances to prevent this behavior. In Bangladesh, the very notion of democracy has been discredited. It is implicitly understood that "winning" an electoral seat necessitates paying a significant amount of money, both to political patrons above and voter clients below. It is further understood that the politician assuming a position of public service (as that term is commonly understood by the Bangladeshi public) attempts to recover the money expended to win the election. Stated differently, a political office is now a kind of financial investment—one available only to the wealthy—that is expected to produce considerable returns. The persistence of this arrangement over time as both the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League, the two main political parties in Bangladesh, have been in power has confirmed to the general public that the arrangement is not an artifact of who assumes power, but an intrinsic component of the system itself. The leadership of both these political parties, when speaking candidly and off the record, would not deny this state of affairs. Indeed, in one instance, this arrangement was presented as a fair payback for the sacrifices of many political leaders, with the understanding that it remains nonetheless an issue to be dealt with "in the future."[2]

Having endured a decade of military rule, the Bangladeshi citizenry welcomed the prospect of a democratic electoral process in 1991. However, it was offered instead a duopoly of oligarchs, that is, alternating rule by and cooperation between the BNP and Awami League. By 2007, after more than a decade and a half of subverted democracy, the Bangladeshi electorate had no local model of an accountable, viable democratic process. The general social discontent with politics and the cynicism about politicians, as well as the initial positive reception enjoyed by the camouflaged military rule instituted on January 11, 2007, can be explained by the ubiquitous repulsion at a political process that was democratic in name only. In light of this situation, a movement away from Bengali nationalism is hardly surprising.

Compounding this movement is the rise of global Islamism. Islamism itself is not an imported ideology in Bangladesh. Even under British rule, local advocates sought to reorganize the state along Islamic principles. Many if not all of these advocates saw in the creation of Pakistan the fulfillment of their vision. They defended this idea of Pakistan even when that nation

carried out a genocidal campaign against their own kin in 1971. In the post-independence era, Bangladeshi Islamists had to ask themselves serious questions about their beliefs and where they had led. While it is not clear how much self-criticism the Islamists of Bangladesh actually undertook, it is evident that they continued efforts to integrate themselves into Bangladeshi society, mainly through social services and "model living" (see chapter 4). It is evident, too, that Bangladeshi Islamists seem to have effectively turned the page on their failed attempt at preserving the idea of Pakistan.

Interestingly, the secularists and leftists also failed to engage in a serious critique of the Islamists' position. They offered no analysis that might have provided the ground for a later deconstruction of the evolving Islamist agenda. Instead, leftists and secularists insisted on portraying the Islamists of 1971 as "traitors," that is, individuals engaged in criminal and mercenary activity against society. Their hope was that Islamists would be shunned by society and ostracized by the political community without the need on their part to delve into the Islamists' motivation and ideology.

The hesitance on the part of secularist, leftist, and nationalist intellectuals to undertake an all-out assault on Islamist ideology stemmed from their grasp of how such an attack would be received in a milieu that values Islam. Rather than engage in a critique that might be viewed as targeting the religious faith of their constituencies, these intellectuals preferred to degrade the behavior of Islamists and remain largely silent about their ideology. This leftist-secularist approach did not bear fruit, however, as the results of elections as early as the 1970s demonstrate. Jamaate, the main player in Islamist politics, was able to restore its previous share of the Bangladeshi electorate rather quickly.[3] By not engaging Islamism at an intellectual and ideological level, the leftists and secularists allowed this ideology to go unchallenged.

Revolution and Jihad

The first two decades of Bangladesh's history corresponded with the transformation of Islamism from a marginal, rejectionist ideology embraced by a minority of utopia-inclined, disenchanted intellectuals into an active force that soon gained dominance. Two major events helped this transformation: the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the international Muslim Jihad in Afghanistan.

In 1979, Iran witnessed a momentous change in the form of a widespread uprising of its population against a regime accused of elitism and dependence on the West. The leadership of this uprising was Islamic in the sense that it espoused principles, slogans, and quotations from the cultural and religious heritage of the nation, and it was Islamist in the sense that these slogans and quotations were used to advocate a new conception of state based on religious rule. While Iran is predominantly Shiite and its revolution was Shiite in character, many

Muslim intellectuals embraced this revolution as the harbinger of the second anti-colonial movement in the Muslim world. The first movement physically removed the colonial powers; the second would remove their proxies.

Islamist movements were energized globally by Iran's Islamic Revolution, and leaders actively discussed the lessons learned from it. The Shiite character of both Iranian society and revolution stood in the way of the total embrace of this dramatic event by Sunni Islamists. Still, Sunni Islamists were not uniform in their vision and in their toleration of their Shiite counterparts. Conservative Sunni Islamists, tracing their intellectual pedigree to the movement of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 18th century Arabia, saw a challenge and a threat in the developments in Iran. However, other Sunni Islamists, in particular the followers of the mid-20th century ideologues Hassan al-Banna and Abul Ala Maududi, accepted the Iranian Revolution as Islamist and found inspiration in it. In particular, the school of Islamism to which Jamaate belongs—one that originates with the revivalism of Abul Ala Maududi—explicitly bypassed sectarian considerations in its assessment of global Muslim conditions.[4] The hopes of Jamaate to reshape Bangladesh as a Shariah state were certainly informed by the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, for if an Islamic state was possible in Iran, the Jamaate reasoned, it was surely possible in Bangladesh.

The second major event—one at least as important in the transformation of Islamism as the Islamic Revolution—was the Jihad in Afghanistan. In 1980, Soviet forces entered Afghanistan, presumably having been invited by a client regime, and a confluence of factors led Islamist movements all over the world to embrace the resistance to the Soviet occupation. The role of the United States in supplying weaponry, of Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf states in providing funds, and of Pakistan in facilitating the logistics has been often highlighted in the histories of the period. However, it remains a fact that the mobilization of Islamist forces was not brought about merely by these international players; it also reflected the internal dynamics of Islamism and its growth into a viable contender in the war of ideas in the Muslim world.

What ensued in Afghanistan had major consequences for the whole world. The Afghan Jihad was an incubator of armed Islamist movements later responsible for violence in many lands, as well as the locus of the fusion and evolution of Islamist doctrines, tactics, and strategies. The Afghan Jihad had two major outcomes: (1) it allowed Islamists to declare military victory over a non-Muslim superpower, and (2) it created connections and links between groups that had previously acted alone and locally. Bangladesh had its share of militants trained on the battlefields of Afghanistan who brought back to Bangladesh both their military expertise and their new radicalized ideology.[5]

It is important to underline that the Afghan-born Islamist ideology was Salafist, Jihadist, and often Takfirist. It was Salafist in its assessment of other Islamist movements, including Jamaate's revivalism, as deficient and prone to unlawful compromise. It was Jihadist in its belief that armed struggle is the way to the Shariah state. It was even Takfirist in its belief that those who fail to adhere to "true Islam" compromise their rights to life and property.

The Failure of Leftism and Secularism

What counterweight to these events could push the pendulum back toward nationalism? Certainly not politics. In the post-1991 restoration of democracy, the Awami League and the BNP settled into a pattern of "comfortable" competition. The two parties looked similar in many respects. Both were espousing electoral democracy as a basic discourse, and relying on the support of segments of the business class to fuel a nationwide machine of patronage. All historical considerations aside, it made very little difference for ordinary Bangladeshi citizens whether they supported one party or the other. This set of conditions created an atmosphere of political apathy—an apathy made worse by the fact that the left, having effectively succumbed to the global failure of Soviet-style socialism, was now limited to a number of die-hard intellectuals.

Nationalism, in its cultural and populist formulations, was further weakened by the sense of globalism that arose following the Cold War. To be sure, globalism has offered considerable promise for Bangladesh. It has fostered a fuller integration of Bangladesh into the world economy, including the forceful emergence of its garments industry; and it has helped to nurture the global civil society movement in Bangladesh, where international NGOs are now putting down roots and local organizations are reshaping themselves as civil society institutions. But it is at odds with nationalism, in Bangladesh as in every other nation.

With leftism and nationalism relegated to the background, and democracy discredited by the increasingly corrupt practices of the two main political parties, Bangladesh is an open field for Islamism as discontent. It is important not to overstate this point. Even with these elements at play, Islamism remains a relatively muted voice in Bangladeshi society. However, the decline of competing voices certainly favors the movement of the pendulum toward Islam. The various incarnations of Islamism, moderate and radical, have entered into an active competition, with the vision advocated by Jamaate now presented as the middle ground between the extremism of the militants on the one hand and the failed vision of the current political system on the other. When the third round of democratic elections took place in 2001, Jamaate as a political party did not demonstrate any major breakthrough in electoral gains, but the general atmosphere in Bangladesh nonetheless had become infused with religious elements. That this was less a success for the Islamists than a failure on the part of the leftists, secularists, and democrats does not affect the larger truth: Bangladesh's movement toward Islam appears to be of a more lasting character than ever before in its history.

chapter two

Factors in the Evolution of the Bangladeshi Polity

Even today, in the year 2007, it is not possible to understand the national ethos of Bangladesh without a proper consideration of the atmosphere and conditions that surrounded the birth of this nation. Few nation-states have emerged into the limelight with as distinct and as traumatic a defining national moment. Bangladesh has also preserved the history of that moment, despite the passage of time and the passing away of most of its actors.

Most national narratives are in three parts: they describe a golden age in a distant past; an immediate past of oppression and decline; and an imminent or current restoration and reelevation. Such narratives, which arguably date back to the first recordings of national history with the Hellenes, have permeated the very notion of national history. During the Renaissance, nations sought to reclaim antiquity; during the Reformation, they sought to reconfirm ties to the original church; and even the new European community might see itself as the rebirth of the Roman Empire. Bangladesh in this respect is a historical oddity. Its emergence from the despotic colonial rule of the West Pakistanis was not then, and is not now, conceived as any return to a previous glory. If other national narratives have a tripartite division—an up, a down, and an up again—the Bangladeshi national narrative consists merely of two parts: a down and an up. This anomaly in the conceptualization of Bangladeshi history is actually a major advantage in helping to provide the Bangladeshi community with an agreed upon point of departure.

History as Prehistory

In Bangladesh there is very little history to contest. It is not that the land of Bengal is devoid of the historical intrigue and accomplishments that have characterized other parts of the subcontinent and the rest of the world. It is that from a *Bangladeshi* perspective, much of this history is indeed prehistory. Unruly tribes inhabiting a frontier land are conquered but not assimilated by successive imperial powers; the ruling elites are determined to preserve religious, social, and other distinctions between themselves and the rest of the population; the

people embrace a new religion in an act of defiance against the elite; a world empire conquers the land, offering it global access and marginalizing it at the same time; it becomes an outpost for another imperial power, this time from across the sea, and serves as a bridgehead into an entire subcontinent; it industrializes and produces a concentration of wealth along with an alien ruler who exploits schisms; it witnesses a cultural renaissance by a new minority that redefines itself to become part of the majority in the region; it undergoes division and redivision to adjust to and accommodate the political tensions of colonialism, until it finally becomes the eastern wing in a state born from the confusion of religion and nationhood.

For Bangladeshis, all this is prehistory.

The history of Bangladesh begins when the people—the destitute, the wretched, the poor, the neglected, and the scorned—take up weapons, fight the superior masters, and defeat them in a moment of national glory. The prelude to this battle of independence is also remembered. It is seen as a stand for language, for culture, and for identity in a decade when attempts were being made to obliterate them. In the 1950s, Pakistan was forced to recognize Bangla, the language of the majority of its population and the primary and paramount language of its eastern wing, as an official language. Following this reluctant recognition, that remote province of Pakistan began to move gradually towards autonomy and independence, in spite of opposition from the colonial rulers of Islamabad. According to memoirs and reports from Pakistani civil servants and military officers, this opposition took the form of systemic mistreatment of the Bengali population of East Pakistan. Those in power clearly rejected the notion that this poverty-stricken, ill-fed, and ill-clothed population should be granted equal rights or independence.

The Bengali intellectual elite—virtually the sole Bengali elite, given that the economic resources of East Pakistan were tightly held by West Pakistanis—wanted to reach an accommodation with the ruling power. Its requests were modest, perhaps because of Muslim-Pakistani solidarity, perhaps because of realism, or even, perhaps, because of the gentle character often attributed to the Bengalis. But these requests were not met.

The official Pakistani justification for the blatant discrimination against East Pakistan, which undeniably was home to the majority of the population of the whole Pakistan, was muted. However, Pakistani intellectuals and officials in more or less private settings articulated it clearly. The Bengali population of East Pakistan included a small but not insignificant minority of Hindus, and—all claims to being a religion-blind nation aside—Pakistan could not afford to have this suspect minority tilt the balance of decision making. On the basis of this argument from the national interest, however weak, even liberal democrats in West Pakistan could feel at ease with the discrimination against inhabitants of the eastern wing. It was the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that broke the stalemate of Bengali docility and West Pakistani arrogance. Sheikh Mujib was an exemplar of the new Bengali politician: demanding, firm, uncompromising, he led Bengalis to the ballot box and to a legitimate victory that tested the limits of Pakistani political processes, democratic and otherwise.

Independence from Pakistan

Pakistan, the nation-state of the Muslims born out of the partition of India, faced in 1970 an existential crisis. The majority of its population voted to elect a prime minister, Sheikh Mujib, who defined himself not primarily as a Muslim, but as a Bengali—and one, at that, demanding autonomy and equal rights for the battered wing of this precarious state. The Pakistan state structures reacted with ferocity. A military takeover ensured that the will of the electorate would be disregarded. Furthermore, efforts were made by the Pakistanis to eradicate this notional threat of a Bengali identity that denied the foundational raison d'etre of Pakistan. People saw or claimed to see everywhere the fingers of India. The detested Bengali Hindu minority, which many in Pakistan saw as a potential fifth column for India, was now a legitimate target. The definition of Hindu was extended to include virtually all Bengalis, and genocide was carried out by the Pakistani forces.

Pakistani history textbooks might portray the episode as one of "self-defense" against forces determined to unravel the nation. Liberals and progressives would later refer, with sadness, to a "partition" that their nation had to endure. For many in India, the events merely confirmed both the fallacy of the 1947 partition and the viciousness of their western neighbor, still demanding further Indian territory in Kashmir.

For Bengalis—the newly defined Bangladeshis—the event was neither about history nor about ideology. It was merely about freedom and life. It was about dignity and the right to one's identity. Rarely in the history of humankind does such a calamity occur. The leadership of the various freedom-fighter factions, irrespective of their ultimate allegiance to Sheikh Mujib, might have had conflicting ideas about what was to follow. But the events of 1971 were not merely an avant garde leading a populace, nor an ideology driving an audience. They were a genuine revolution fueled by legitimate widespread grievances and enabled by a charismatic leader. If Gandhi was the soul of India and Jinnah was the mind of Pakistan, for Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujib was both soul and mind.

It was the spontaneous and popular nature of the Bangladesh revolution that paved the way for the anticlimactic effects to follow. By trying to place this organic success of the people of Bangladesh into the framework of the global socialist movement and by trying to apply templates from that movement (Stalinist statism, one-party rule, populism), Sheikh Mujib and his associates dissipated a large portion of the good will and support they had garnered both locally and internationally. One effect of placing the emergence of Bangladesh in the context of the world socialist revolution was to invite superpower as well as regional-power rivalries into the domestic Bangladeshi scene.[6] By 1975, when Sheikh Mujib was assassinated, the "purity" of the Bangladesh revolution had already been severely tarnished.

The year 1975 was thus viewed not only as the end of Sheikh Mujib's era, but also by extension

as the end of the influence of India and the Soviet Union. General Ziaur Rahman, himself a hero of the Bangladesh Liberation War, emerged as a conservative nationalist who had affinities with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, in contradistinction to Sheikh Mujib, who by adopting socialist rhetoric and formulae was viewed as being in the camp of India and the Soviet Union.

It should be noted that the Bangladeshi leadership and general public—unlike many Bangladeshi intellectuals—were not driven by ideology. Sheikh Mujib and the other contender for the role of "Father of the Nation," General Ziaur Rahman (known as Zia) adopted ideological formulations, but mostly as a means to an end—the end being the consolidation of Bangladesh under their leadership. [7] The essentially non-ideological outlook of the leadership became more obvious in the post-Cold War era. During the global confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Awami League, which was the party of Sheikh Mujib, and the Bangladesh National Party, which was the party of General Zia, adopted narratives to place themselves in opposing camps; but with the end of the Cold War these ideological discourses dissipated, and the two parties could be seen offering what they had in fact always offered, personal leadership. Dynastic leadership in both parties merely confirmed the importance of personality over ideology.

General Zia is often credited with the introduction of Islamic rhetorical devices into the mainstream of Bangladeshi culture. On his way to Saudi Arabia in 1974, for example, he actually used adhesive tape to attach the expression "In the Name of God, the Most Beneficent and the Most Merciful" to the preamble to the Bangladesh Constitution. However, this addition of Islamic language was probably meant as decorative or indicative of identity; the gesture is best understood as a symbolic, utilitarian one, not unlike the use of "socialist" artifacts by Sheikh Mujib. Both leaders were catering to the demands of an international climate in their quest for support.

The attempts by General Zia to elevate Islam may have been symbolic at the time, but they occurred in a context that would amplify their importance. That context included two parallel processes: the restoration of the Muslim component of Bangladeshi identity following the end of the Pakistan era, and the international growth in Islamist militancy.

It was the Bengali cultural component of the East Pakistanis' identity that the Islamabad military junta sought to exterminate. Bengalis reacted by displaying a particular attachment to it, together with considerable revulsion towards some of the symbolism and actors associated with the oppressors: Pakistani crescents, the Urdu-Arabic script, and in particular the clerics and Islamic militants who sided with the oppressors against the Bangladeshi population. With the triumph of the freedom movement and the end of the Pakistani era, Bangladesh could once again embrace its Muslim piety and Islamic identity, which had long been a mainstay of Bengali cultural life. This embrace was not ideological—the practice of religion in Bangladesh has historically been apolitical—but simply social, cultural, and ritual. Bengalis were once again allowed to practice *their* religion, without foreign overseers critiquing them and directing them in how to pray and behave.

Jihadism and Islamism

But the global ideological climate was changing, and this situation could not last. In the wider Muslim world, a potent combination of two tendencies was coalescing. In Saudi Arabia, a literalist, puritanical, parochial understanding of the Islamic faith had entered into an alliance with the Saudi monarchy, which established itself as the sole religious institution of the kingdom. In Egypt and the Levant, as well as in India and Pakistan, a reformist, revivalist political movement that placed religious ideas at the core of any conception of state had been adopted by many intellectuals. By combining the ideological drive of this reformist, revivalist movement with the resources available to Saudi Arabia's conservative religious establishment, Afghanistan effectively countered Soviet expansionism. Indeed, the cooperation between this movement and this establishment proved to be far more than tactical. Offshoots of Saudi-style Islam fused with the revivalist movement to create a stringent, uncompromising global Jihadist movement available for activation when and where conditions were ripe. The history of the Muslim world since has been a series of attempted Jihadist revolutions, built upon local needs and conditions as well as the Jihadist movement's opportunism and utopianism.

In Bangladesh, this evolution in Islam has offered local Islamists a way to absolve themselves of the original sin of having fought their own nation—that is, by identifying, once again, with an external ally-sponsor-master. In their vision for Bangladesh, that ally-sponsor-master knows better than the Bengalis and sees to it that they practice their religion "correctly."

The prominence of Jihadism and Islamism coincides with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent deflation of socialist and antisocialist rhetoric. In other words, the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh happened against the backdrop of a paucity of ideological movements. Nationalism has dissipated with the fading memory of the Liberation War. Socialism has been discredited by its lack of success internationally. And liberal democracy in Bangladesh has been afflicted with the burdens of corruption and elitism. Islamism, untested, unproven, and still limited in its appeal in Bangladesh, may nevertheless be the only thriving ideology in the country.

Rising from the Ashes

Bangladesh, first as East Bengal and then as East Pakistan, is a land that has been shortchanged twice. As East Bengal, it was deprived of its urban, industrial core: Calcutta, the capital, together with its prosperous developed surroundings, was assigned to West Bengal. As East Pakistan, it was relegated to the status of a far-off colony, to be exploited for its natural resources and mistreated as a captive market.

The east-west division of Bengal was not accidental. While Hindus constituted a minority of the Bengali population, they acquired a favored status under British rule. This was due in part to their own willingness as a minority barred from power in Muslim India to grab an opportunity presented to them, but also due to the British preference for non-Muslims in controlling the jewel of their Crown. By the turn of the twentieth century, having undergone a cultural renaissance and having benefited from British rule, Hindu Bengalis were ready to assert their separate identity in West Bengal. This left East Bengal at a disadvantage.

Muslims may have had the upper hand in pre-British India. This was not the case, however, with Muslim Bengalis. Dominated economically and politically by elite Muslims from outside Bengal, Muslim Bengalis were merely the Atraf, the marginal lower caste, as opposed to the Ashraf, the nobility, coming to Bengal from the west and north. The Pakistan era merely confirmed the Ashraf-Atraf configuration, with the West Pakistanis assuming the role of the upper caste and confining Bengalis to lower-caste status. But when the new nation of Bangladesh came into being following the end of the Liberation War, it was close to being a classless society. The country began with a clean slate; there was no local elite, at least not in the economic sense. For the first time, the economy was dominated neither by Muslim non-Bengalis nor non-Muslim Bengalis; it was Muslim Bengalis who assumed the role of a driving economic force in their own land. Although mismanagement, abuse, and perennial colonization had left the new Bangladesh in ruins—scourged by famine, floods, drought, ubiquitous poverty, and pandemic disease—in one generation, Bangladesh rose from the ashes and developed a workable economy, achieved sustainable growth, and established programs for poverty and disaster management.

It was definitely not a fairy tale. The socioeconomic successes of Bangladesh came with a heavy burden of corrosive corruption and political mayhem. Yet there remains a major success story to be told, that of the entrepreneurial Muslim Bengali families that took over the reins of an economy in shambles and set the country on the road to development. The lack of political and social institutions in the country made its evolution chaotic, erratic, and unequal. Some profited and accumulated astronomical wealth, by means that can be labeled white, gray, or outright black. Others benefited much less, for it was just a handful of families that, through opportunity, connections, and education, were able to fashion and dominate a new economy for the new nation. However, Bangladesh is no longer a land of terminal poverty. Benefit concerts are no longer needed to ensure that children do not die of hunger.[8] While the plight of children and the poor in Bangladesh is still considerable, substantive improvements have occurred in the past generation.

At first, despite the socialist rhetoric of the state, the lack of institutional constraints and regulations made it possible for the new entrepreneurs to operate in an environment of predatory capitalism; their only concessions were to the ruling power as a regulator.[9] The state of Bangladesh gradually reestablished a bureaucratic framework, and in the three decades that followed, entrepreneurs and bureaucrats contested for power and influence. In this context—

an initial lack of adequate controls and the absence of an institution-minded political leadership—the socioeconomic elite and the political class established a pattern of relying on informal arrangements to achieve their ends. Corruption in Bangladesh is now largely the result of the routinization of these informal arrangements, which have suited most of those with political and economic power, even as these arrangements work against systematic transparency and accountability. It has therefore been difficult to find a constituency with both the will and the ability to undo them and to impose the rule of law in their stead.

Endemic Corruption

Little distinction can in this respect be made between the "socialist" and capitalist phases of Bangladeshi history; or between the autocratic and democratic episodes; or for that matter between the reign of the Awami League and that of the BNP, since there is no denying the fact that informal arrangements—i.e., corruption—characterized all of them. The argument made by specific regimes has been merely that it was worse during the reign of the opponent party. A high-ranking member of one of the two major parties even intimated that turning a blind eye to corrupt informal arrangements was one way to reward long-term loyal party members who had previously made considerable sacrifices.[10]

Yet claims that there is a qualitative difference between corruption under the two parties might not be unfounded. Two types of corruption can be identified: one, so-called sustainable corruption, allows the more or less adequate functioning of state institutions while skimming and appropriating "nonessential" resources; the other, so-called rapacious corruption, plunders any allocated resources with little regard to the effect on the underlining function. The common wisdom in Bangladesh is that the first BNP government, from 1991 to 1995, was characterized by corruption of the former type, as were the Awami League governments between 1996 and 2001. The BNP government of 2001–2006, on the other hand, practiced corruption of the latter type. While it is rather difficult to verify these claims, the ostentatious display of wealth and the blatant disregard for regulations and norms did appear to reach new heights between 2001 and 2006.

The unruliness and ultimate unraveling of informal arrangements can be attributed to the expansion of the entrepreneurial class in Bangladesh, a result of the economic growth of the 1990s. In the 1970s and even the 1980s, the small number of families that dominated the economic sector in Bangladesh had what could be termed a gentleman's agreement, through which their sometimes rapacious competition was checked and balanced. With the economic growth in the 1990s raising an aspiring middle-class and allowing some of its members to achieve elite economic status, previous unstated understandings were no longer acceptable or enforceable. The new entrepreneurs sought to integrate themselves into the same pattern

of collusion between the political class and the former economic elite. They often succeeded, maybe too much. By exploiting an already paper-thin system of patronage and delivery of services, the newcomers unmasked what was, before, a plausibly deniable arrangement.

While state institutions in Bangladesh remained inadequate and were themselves often plagued by corruption, over its three and a half decades of existence Bangladesh developed enough of a bureaucratic critical mass to offer a certain degree of resistance to the informal arrangements between entrepreneurs and politicians. While much of the bureaucracy in Bangladesh remained in need of political overhaul, a residual core of professional bureaucrats developed. In particular, with the professionalization of the army and its relative exclusion from the daily political process, retiring middle-aged army officers assumed nonmilitary bureaucratic functions, providing a much-needed influx of expertise. Although this influx of retired officers into some quasi-independent state institutions might be seen as a harbinger of the amplified role that the army has taken after the action of January 11, 2007, it had the effect of slightly correcting the balance in the then-skewed rivalry between entrepreneurs and bureaucrats.

With the emergence of the nouveaux entrepreneurs of the 1990s and the dismantling of the old, informal arrangements, the democratic capitalist system came to be discredited. It is fair to say that in the 1990s, and more distinctly from 2001 onwards, the Bangladeshi voter participated in the electoral process as a means of ensuring the continuity of services through patronage systems and not directly through state institutions. The Bangladeshi assessment of democracy was thus purely utilitarian, and even cynical. It was understood that politicians by definition are corrupt and are a necessary evil. This assessment of democracy and free markets provided a crucial opening for the sole vigorous ideology in Bangladesh, Islamism.

Islamism and Corruption

Islamists promised a government free of corruption, one whose divinely mandated rules were not subject to modification, alteration, and neglect by human legislators. They even implemented a sort of pilot program to demonstrate their integrity and commitment to the public: upon the Jamaate's assumption of a place in the BNP-led government in 2001, Jamaate officials strove to distance themselves from the ostentatious display of wealth and power engaged in by their BNP colleagues and demonstrated the Islamist ethos of public service by passing on to constituents far more of the resources under their control than either the BNP or the Awami League would have done.

Yet Jamaate officials have not been above corruption; and while in some ways less obvious than its BNP or even Awami League equivalent, Jamaate corruption has possibly been even more damaging to the future of rule of law in Bangladesh. Jamaate officials do not practice

rapacious corruption, which simply drains all resources, or sustainable corruption, which skims some resources while allowing program continuity; instead, they practice a "virtuous" corruption, which illegally channels resources from the national community to Jamaate's own constituents.

It is notable, if not surprising, that the Anti-Corruption Commission in its expanded role after the January 11, 2007, action has sought only to prosecute corruption of the rapacious and sustainable types, but has avoided addressing the equally harmful "virtuous" corruption. How the Jamaate has taken advantage of Bangladesh's culture of corruption—notably the failure of government to reliably provide its citizens with services—is described in the next chapter.

chapter three

Ascendancy of Religion in Politics

The fact that Islamists in Bangladesh have been striving to lay the foundation of a Shariah state is no secret. Their efforts present a complex set of difficulties for democratic life in the country, similar to those faced by democratic systems that had allowed the activities of Communist parties prior to the fall of the Soviet Empire: both Communism and Islamism tactically accept the democratic rules of the game in order to promote and eventually establish a system that negates democracy.

The issue in Bangladesh is twofold. First, the nature of the Islamist threat might not be sufficiently appreciated. Some doubt that the program of the Islamists includes the establishment of a Shariah state, or they are skeptical of the Islamists' ability to reach their goal. Second, there is no counter-program in effect to address the comprehensive character of the Islamists' agenda, notably in the area of cultural radicalization. To date, attempts to address the risks of cultural radicalization have only intensified the effects of the Islamist program.

Cultural Radicalization and the Shariah State

Radicalization is the attempt to "restore" a society's cultural purity by reconnecting it—in practices and in rites—with an idealized Golden Age distant in space and time. This so-called restoration often comes at the expense of the society's actual historical and cultural legacies. In the case of Bangladesh, the cultural radicalization sought by Islamists posits a fictionalized "society of the Prophet" that overshadows the lived and shared experiences and traditions of the millennia-old Bengali culture. Bengali culture at its apogee was a synthesis of Islamic values and local traditions and practices. Islam has always been an integral part of Bengali culture, while Bengali culture has been the backbone of the moral, intellectual, literary, and societal life of the Muslims of Bengal.

As part of their program of cultural radicalization in Bangladesh, Islamists have created a dichotomy between a fictionalized monolithic Islam and a local culture redefined and rebranded as Hindu. But this is an artificial dichotomy that is better understood as a top-down

expression of power and control than as a reflection of a genuine native conflict. This expression of power has antecedents, notably in the attempt by the former West Pakistani leadership to suppress and regiment the East Pakistani subjects. Even prior to the rise of independent Pakistan, in Mughal times, a similar expression of power was manifested in the promotion of Persian and Urdu as languages of the elite at the expense of the local culture.

Today the process of cultural radicalization in Bangladesh is propelled by this history of top-down control, as well as by the current global experience of Islamism across the Muslim world. The cultural radicalization currently faced by Bangladesh has the potential to institute longer-term cultural conflicts. Addressing it is necessary in order to maintain local stability and to face down the threat of political radicalization that it feeds.

The difficulty is that the issue of cultural radicalization, both cause and effect of the political radicalism that has surfaced in Bangladesh, has been underreported and little investigated. Slowly but surely, proponents of a monolithic understanding of Islam have been implementing elements of their program of cultural "purification." Their means range from the peaceful to the violent. Bangladesh, traditionally a tolerant and pluralistic society, is therefore experiencing the possibility of an irreversible transformation. While members of civil society who support a more open conception of society, culture, and politics fail to react to the emergent threat with any coherent program, we must ask ourselves whether this impetus for transformation and the lack of response to it reflect a changing cultural mood in Bangladesh, or whether they are due to extrinsic political factors. We must ask, more importantly, whether Bangladesh can survive as a pluralistic and tolerant society, or whether is it indeed witnessing a fateful evolution towards religious regimentation.

It is not surprising that Islam should play a role in Bengali politics, given how deeply rooted Islam is in Bengali identity and history. The important function of Islam in Bengali life prompted even secularist ideologues, such as Mujibur Rahman, to seek to accommodate it. What characterizes Islamist activism is the exploitation of Islam's central role in Bengali identity—and the refusal to acknowledge any other components of this identity.

That the Jamaate has a long-term plan for Bangladesh is clear: it advocates the establishment of a Shariah state through the violent overthrow of the established order. Born of Islamist revivalist thought in the first half of the twentieth century, the Jamaate has moved with other Islamist groups throughout the world to embrace some precepts of Salafism, a rigid understanding of Shariah. In so doing, it has paved the way in Bangladesh for the emergence of Salafi groups. These have made their entry into the cultural and political scene through conservative *ulemas* (religious scholars), who inhabit mosques in many districts of the country, and through the militant Jihadist group Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). In accordance with a pattern of penetration adopted by a multitude of sister Islamist organizations worldwide, the Jamaate is also seeking a presence in the student, worker, and professional sectors. Its gains have been considerable, although they are still checked by an established tradition in Bangladesh of religion-free activism in all three of these sectors.

The radicalizers' willingness to resort to violence and coercion, and their efforts to disseminate an ideology of intolerance and to suppress the free exchange of ideas, have led to an atmosphere of fear and have damaged the tradition of tolerance that Bangladesh has historically enjoyed. Journalists have been singled out for harassment and not-so-occasional assassinations, authors have been muted or ostracized, and NGO workers have been threatened by radicalizers seeking to undermine the traditional sources of tolerance and free thought in Bangladesh. Education in the country is also being transformed with the rise of the *madrasas*, intended to produce a generation of culturally "pure" youth for an envisioned Islamist future.

The Radicalizers' Target

It is possible to identify at least six different groups targeted by the promoters of cultural radicalization as they seek to implement their program of purification: **(1) "Hindus," (2) "Christians," (3) "heretics," (4) minorities, (5) those considered socially deviant,** and **(6) critical voices.**

1. *The "Hindu" Target:* The quotation marks around "Hindu" indicate its use by the radicalizers as a euphemism for various traditional components of the Bengali cultural legacy not sanctioned by the Islamist utopia. This target includes many aspects of culture in Bangladesh, from the music that dots everyday life, to cultural celebrations, to matters of dress and other visual display, to the political process itself. The millennia-old Bengali New Year celebration comes under this heading: until recently a cultural staple in Bangladesh, it is now ignored, contested, or questioned, and has even been the occasion of violent attacks.[11] In a spontaneous popular reaction to these attacks, many Bengalis now embrace this celebration even more energetically. The fact remains, however, that the initiative is in the hands of those who challenge it.

2. *The "Christian" Target:* "Christian" serves as the radicalizers' euphemism for any and all components of public life that stem from the pool of cultural, political, educational, and social facets of Western civilization. The use of English, the reliance on democratic institutions (such as the Constitution), the wearing of Western-style dress, are all viewed as markers of a Christian contamination of Bangladesh and are met with the call for purification.[12]

3. *The "Heretic" Target:* "Heretics," according to the radicalizers, are those Muslims who choose a path of belief different from the monolithic faith promoted by radical Islamists. The Ahmadiyya, a South Asian Islamic religious movement that the radicalizers refuse to acknowledge as Islamic, falls into this category and has been a favorite target. Ahmadiyya mosques have been attacked, and Ahmadiyya families have been ostracized and occasionally

subjected to violence. The government's response has been one of apathy at best; at worst, it seems to assist the radicalizers: even English-language dailies publish the dates and locations of the intended attacks on Ahmadiyya mosques, and the Religious Affairs Ministry bans publications, sales, and distribution of literature by the Ahmadiyya community.[13]

4. *The "Minorities" Target:* With the term "Hindu" now being affixed to Bengali culture in general, the actual Hindu Bangladeshis find themselves relegated to an even more marginal status, that of the physically undesirable/unacceptable. Hindu Bangladeshis and other religious minorities live under constant threat; anti-Hindu public statements by radical politicians, as well as the brutal targeting of symbols of Bangladeshi open culture, have reinforced this atmosphere of fear. An effective ethnic cleansing program was implemented in Bangladesh even before the rise of organized cultural radicalization. Hindu Bangladeshis, at one point a sizeable minority within the Bangladeshi population, are today a vanishing relic of bygone times. The promoters of cultural radicalization view this loss suffered by Bangladesh as a victory in their cultural Jihad.[14]

5. *The "Socially Deviant" Target:* "Deviant" social behavior, according to the stated and unstated positions of the promoters of cultural radicalization, is often associated with women, and in particular women activists. The status, physical appearance, or behavior of women that fails to conform to the radicalizers' view of what is acceptable is labeled deviant. Across the Muslim world, Islamist movements have measured their success by their ability to control women and to box them into predefined support roles. The place of women in traditional Bengali society was not restricted to the private realm. Promoters of cultural radicalization in Bangladesh have therefore been rather shy in their attempts to force women into conformity with the segregation standard. However, from separate seating at Jamaate events to the absence of women at public events, it is apparent that an implicit project of segregation and marginalization is in effect. While mainstream Islamist movements in Bangladesh have been careful in handling the issue of women, NGOs and women activists have been regular targets of underground movements connected to the cultural radicalization project.[15]

6. *The "Critical Voices" Target:* It has been suggested that Bangladesh is enduring a project for theocracy and a project for autocracy, both of which negate the traditional Bangladeshi practices of open communication, tolerance, freedom of expression, and diversity of opinions. This suggestion may be subject to debate. What is not is that many journalists and opinion makers have been dismissed, harassed, battered, and imprisoned by the government and Islamist groups. Even voices that are constructively critical are rebuked as damaging the country's image. This official or quasi-official atmosphere of intolerance feeds upon the cultural radicalization project and, in turn, nourishes it. The end result is the potential slide of Bangladesh away from its hard-earned status as a free and open society.[16]

Responses to Radicalization

The cultural radicalization project in Bangladesh, a top-down effort with an ideological impetus, has generated diverse reactions, some spontaneous and some deliberate. All these reactions can be seen, depending on their origin, either as social responses or political counteractions.

Social responses have been numerous. From the use of the teep (bindi) on the forehead, to the revival of Bengali-style fashion at the various socioeconomic levels, Bangladeshi society has sought to preserve its diverse cultural legacy and not to succumb to the uniform vision espoused by the promoters of cultural radicalization. Resistance to the radicalization effort can also be seen in the works of art that document, continue, and further develop the cultural legacy of Bengal. New artists, vocal as well visual, are offering works rooted in Bengali traditions to an appreciative wider public. Although not explicitly conceived or offered as a comprehensive rejection of cultural radicalization, this art, retaining its individual and unorganized character, constitutes an organic resistance movement that is virtually impossible to defeat.

As to the political counteractions, these have been as varied as the forces that inhabit the Bangladeshi political spectrum.

Socialist and communist movements at the extreme left have preserved a nationalistic tone in their discourse and have therefore been consistently critical of cultural radicalization, often by linking it to the antirevolutionary forces that fought against the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. For these movements, cultural radicalization recalls the era of East Pakistan and their rejection of it on political as well as social grounds. These leftist movements view the current rise of Islamism in Bangladesh as a continuation of an attempt by Pakistan to reinsert itself in Bangladesh and gain back its 1971 losses. It is the case that some Pakistani agencies and political players have had a role in the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh. But reducing the phenomenon of cultural radicalization to a mainly Pakistani intervention, as these movements do, ignores the native factors that are contributing to it.

The left-of-center mainline political movement, the Awami League, heir to the Founder of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, posits itself as the secular (if not secularist) response to the project of cultural radicalization. The AL has displayed an awareness of the spread of the phenomenon and repeatedly announced a deliberate program of cultural reinvigoration to address it. Some components of this program are at the grassroots level and therefore not readily measurable in their effect and impact. However, a clearer comprehensive plan for the Awami League remains to be articulated.

The right-of-center Bangladesh National Party maintains that the two main components of Bangladeshi culture, the Bengali and the Islamic, exist in a stable equilibrium. BNP officials have often noted the resistance of Bangladeshi culture to any induced change and therefore

have characterized warnings against cultural radicalization as politically motivated and/or alarmist. However, this BNP assessment ignores the reality of an incremental but steady alteration in Bangladesh's cultural landscape. Furthermore, it inadvertently masks some of the more radical change taking place through the ruling coalition it formed with the Jamaate.

The Jamaate, to the right of the BNP, favors the cultural radicalization that the country is witnessing—without applying the label "radicalization" to it. Jamaate leaders might officially stress the peaceful character of their Islamization. However, their actions and more unguarded words tell another story. The extremities of the Jamaate's true beliefs are evident in the statement of a Jamaate official who characterized the induced flight of Hindu Bangladeshis from the country as similar to the human body getting rid of excrement.[17]

Finally, the radical Islamist underground movements at the extreme right are themselves driving the violent implementation of the cultural transformation. They cannot be expected to have any complaint about it, except perhaps its slow pace.

What this quick overview indicates is that no coherent program to counter cultural radicalization in Bangladesh exists, in spite of the urgent need for one. Any such program will need to take into account the radicalizers' methods and the deep causes of their success, however limited.

The Radicalizers' Methods

While violence has been the most prominent of the methods used by the radicalizers, it is by no means the sole or main vehicle for this program. Two other methods—cultural saturation and the provision of what might be called ideologized social services—help to explain the progress that has been made towards radicalization among people who have largely viewed themselves as immune to the risks of religious extremism.

The backbone of the cultural saturation method is the *madrasa* education system, which along with publications, broadcasts, and sermons is used to instill Islamist thought and values in Bangladeshi culture. While in a free society the Islamists' program would compete with other ideas and values, the atmosphere of fear in Bangladesh has destroyed the level playing field. Any approach to the problem of cultural radicalization will have to have as its main objective the restoration of an atmosphere where competing ideas can be freely exchanged.

As for the provision of ideologized social services as a method for achieving cultural radicalization, it is not hard to see the appeal of this technique. The main reason why cultural radicalization has been possible in Bangladesh is not related to culture but rather to the failure of the government to serve its citizens. The spread of corruption, the inefficiency and degradation in government services, and the ensuing waning of confidence in the political system have created a fertile ground for groups outside the government to supply social and economic

services, which are delivered along with ideas, values, and cultural elements in conformity with the radicalizers' ideology. When Bangladesh's citizens take advantage of these needed services, they are inevitably subjected to a program of cultural radicalization.

Since independence in 1971, the Jamaate has developed institutions parallel to the government's. Rather than behaving like a conventional political party, which would monitor the government's performance and point out its deficiencies, the Jamaate functions as an alternative system in its own right. With its educational, economic, and medical services, it has created in Bangladesh a kind of state-within-a-state:

- While state schools fail to provide lunch for students, the Jamaate-sponsored *madrasas* not only furnish lunch, they also offer after-school tutorials for students. Needless to say, the religion taught in these *madrasas* is not the traditional version prevalent in Bangladesh but a militant version that offers its own understanding of what is the pure Islam. To the poor and pious of Bangladesh, however, the combination of lunch and God is an attractive package that trumps what any public school can offer.

- In the banking sector, the Jamaate-influenced Islamic Bank has been outperforming other banking institutions. This has effectively created a parallel economy that fosters Islamist businesses while remaining out of the state's control. In what may be an ominous sign of further Islamization of the banking system, the largest state bank was recently purchased by Saudi interests.

- Public medical care in Bangladesh is full of gaps, but the Jamaate-sponsored Ibn Sina Hospital provides state-of-the-art health services that were unheard of in the country until recently.

In comparison with those of the government, Jamaate institutions are models of performance, efficiency, and integrity that provide necessary services for the population at large (as well as jobs for young professionals associated with the Jamaate movement). The state-within-a-state constituted by these institutions gives the Jamaate extraordinary influence. It is a mistake to measure the Jamaate's power by its seats in parliament; it seeks power not through elective office but through a total transformation of Bengali society—and this transformation appears already well under way. Bangladeshis engage in wishful thinking when they convince themselves that this change is not real, or, at worst, real but contained. They need only look west to countries such as Lebanon to see what a presumably containable state-within-a-state can bring to a thriving society.

Countering Radicalization

A coherent response to cultural radicalization cannot be reactive, and it cannot let the enemy define its areas of operation. If cultural radicalization involves inducing conflict where none existed, the response to it must be more than simply defending the component of culture that is considered under attack. Islamist cultural radicalization targets Bengali culture, but countering it should not involve merely defending Bengali culture. It should involve instead a rejection of the very dichotomy between Islam and Bengali culture that the Islamists posit. Bangladesh can assert pride in its Islamic heritage without having to pass a test of Islamicity artificially imposed by the promoters of cultural radicalization. Furthermore, Bangladesh can declare its embrace of global civilization in all its facets, including democracy and secularism, without feeling the need to justify in Islamic (or more appropriately, *Islamist*) terms that it has done so. Addressing the growing threat of cultural radicalization requires this unapologetic spirit.

The plan to counter cultural radicalization has to be based on four solid premises:

1. Recognition of the universality of human rights and values and a rejection of their attribution to a Western or Christian origin. Malaysia's societal Islam, Islam Hadari, can be invoked as a form of Islam that accepts traditional cultural practices.

2. An insistence on the intrinsic relation between Islam—not only as a culture and a civilization but also as a religion—and Bengal as land, society, and history. In other words, any artificially posited dichotomy between Bengali identity and Muslim identity must be rejected.

3. A positive insistence on the future of Bangladesh as a state for all its citizens, with a recognition of the ancient and proven Islamic values of tolerance, diversity, and acceptance of others—Muslim or not—and rejection of the new Islamist conception of a monolithic Shariah state.

4. Zero tolerance for any movement, ideology, or political group that uses violence and intimidation as a way of achieving its aims, and the development of a national consensus towards that effect.

Proponents of liberal democratic values have often claimed the innate compatibility of the notions they advocate with Bangladeshi culture. The current situation is indeed the test of this view, which holds that the country's current climate of intolerance is not a necessary expression of its culture but rather a cultural transformation brought about by promoters of radical political views. It is against a backdrop of political corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency that promoters of radical movements present themselves, often credibly, as models of efficiency and integrity. Certainly the efficient and reliable delivery of services is what matters to the ordinary Bangladeshi. But the transformative cultural dimension—the offering of a "true" form of religion to a pious society—progresses as a byproduct of the political dimension. The implications of this phenomenon in Bangladesh are also considerable in the Bangladeshi diaspora, notably in the Persian Gulf (see chapter 6). Cultural radicalization paves the way for political movements that often espouse violence as the means for change. Europe has already experienced the effects of a radicalization that originated overseas.

The future of cultural radicalization depends on the success of its promoters in positing a clash of cultures in Bangladesh. Opponents of radicalization can defuse it and avoid the political adventurism it spawns by reclaiming the cultural space and denying the radicalizers the institutions that they have usurped.

chapter four

Islamist Agendas—A Blueprint for the Future

There is universal agreement among Islamists of all schools that an ultimate aim of their militancy is the creation of a state and society based on Shariah. Disagreements emerge as to how to reach this aim, whether it is reachable at all, and, if not, what measures to take in order to approximate it. However, a far more drastic disagreement among the Islamists remains unstated and often undiscussed: what *is* a Shariah state? It is worth noting that the use of the word Shariah in conjunction with earthly systems, whether political, judicial, or behavioral, is a recent innovation in Islamic literature. Shariah was conventionally understood as being "divine law," that is, the system of human behavior ordained by God. However, it was also understood that since human beings are imperfect, they can never claim to fully comprehend this divine system, and they should therefore content themselves with perpetually striving to get closer to it. Thus, the word used in the past to refer to Islamic jurisprudence was *fiqh*, literally, the quest for understanding.[18]

In the twentieth century, in imitation of other ideologies, Islamism moved toward presenting its utopia as a full-fledged, complete, and static vision (as opposed to the traditional, dynamic quest). This new Shariah-utopia has little detailed content. Islamism, virtually alone among ideologies, is primarily negative: it is abundantly verbose about what *should not* be done in state and society, but rather unclear about what *should* be done, beyond a few basic social directives. Effectively, the Islamist message can be reduced to sound bites: "wear the *hijab*" and "pray a lot." Modesty for women, and divine living through prayer for everyone, may indeed be praiseworthy endeavors. But a genuine political program cannot focus on these directives to the exclusion of serious logistical and operational considerations for the present and future of the nation.

In Bangladesh, the Jamaate explicitly aims to infuse state and society with Muslim values as a preliminary step towards erecting a Shariah state. In the words of one major leader of this Islamist party, "the struggle in Bangladesh is one of generations."[19] Yet the progression towards that Islamist utopia, which proponents admit will be a long-term project, remains uncharted.

The Jamaates' Plan

While the concept of a Shariah state remains vague and unsubstantial, this does not mean that the Jamaate and other Islamist groups fail to follow a coherent plan. Their plan, however, contrary to their proclaimed ideology, is not informed by some template for the application of Shariah (since no such template exists), but by modern methods for governing and for consolidating power that rely on **(1) populism, (2) the provision of social services,** and **(3) model ethical behavior on the part of leaders.** Let us look at each of these three elements in turn.

1. ***Populism.*** Jamaate and other Islamists appeal to populism when they posit Islam as the incarnation of the national faith and ethos against imported Western, secular, and democratic values. This approach is populist because it capitalizes on the alien character of the targeted notions and opposes them to the familiar Islamic ones. The issue is not whether concepts such as individual freedom and social responsibility have root in the Muslim tradition or not; the objective answer is that they absolutely do. But these concepts, as presented by the Islamists, are expressed by imported words such as democracy and secularism, are held up as foreign to the belief system of the common folk, and are thus to be rejected. This device of guilt by association—through which a notion is attacked for being promoted by a foreigner, and any mention of the notion's local ancestry is deliberately omitted—is not an Islamist creation. Across cultures, in South Asia and beyond, nationalists and nativists have resorted to it in order to fend off challenging concepts.

2. ***Provision of social services.*** In the course of the ideological debates of the mid-twentieth century, both the socialist and capitalist camps saw Islam as a potential ally. The former highlighted the Islamic insistence on the creation of networks for the support of the downtrodden, while the latter focused on the value that Islam assigned to personal initiative and accountability. This illustrates the fact that Islam, as a complex, millennia-old tradition, is open to diverse, and even opposite, interpretations. Modern Islamists, in their effort to mobilize the masses, have clearly opted to endorse the socialist interpretation of Islam. Islamist social service networks, extensive and efficient, can be traced more to theories of social support and of community organization emerging in the last century than to Islamic norms and systems. Still, it is to the credit of Islamists that they have succeeded in reformulating social service in Islamic terms, making it more palatable to the target audience.

In the past two decades, against the backdrop of the failure of state services, Bangladesh has witnessed two parallel movements of social organization: the civil society movement and the Islamist social services movement. Stemming from the same social background and addressing similar concerns, both of these movements were characterized by distinct dynamism.

However, the civil society movement was encumbered by the administrative demands of the international donor community, which resulted in an additional burden and a loss of resources. The Islamist social services movement also tapped into an international network for funding and for supply of resources. However, this Islamic network, fueled by the religious injunction to collect and distribute *zakat* (alms) and meet other religious financial obligations, was less troubled by the burdens of accountability. An international NGO supplying a local civil society institution with funds and resources would still have to satisfy taxation and auditing requirements in its home country and would therefore require a certain type of record keeping by its local Bangladeshi partner. On the other hand, a charitable organization from an oil-rich Gulf country supplying a local Bangladeshi social service organization with funds would be more likely to provide its support using a "Muslim honor system." The result is that there is no level playing field for the civil society movement and the Islamist social services movement.

Compounding this disparity is the fact that non-Islamist politicians in Bangladesh implicitly shunned the civil society movement, in part because of the accountability strings attached it, while Islamist politicians sponsored and fostered the Islamist social services movement. The end result was that by 2006, the Islamist social services movement was integrated into the state functions that were controlled by the Islamists—in fact, the cabinet minister for social services in the last elected government was a member of the Jamaate—while the civil society movement was antagonistic to the political class.

3. *Ethical behavior by leaders.* It is to the credit of the Islamist leaders that they have been able to avoid the temptation of personal corruption. In a social and political environment that tests the limits of the public tolerance for the abuse of office, Islamist public figures have largely been successful in preserving the image of clean, ethical living. As I suggested earlier (chapter 2), a distinction can be made between diversions of public funds for personal benefit and those for the benefit of a particular constituency. While the latter is questionable from a legal and political point of view, from a social point of view it can be seen as virtuous.

What is noteworthy is that the three pillars of the Jamaate agenda, while presented as reflecting Muslim values, are not restricted to either Islam or Islamism. In fact all three pillars—populism, social services, and model ethical behavior—have been repeatedly used by other political actors, and can be used in the future by political actors interested in competing with Jamaate. It is an artifact of Bangladeshi history that populism as an antidote to globalism, social service networks as a relic of Soviet-era politics, and model ethical behavior as an encumbrance to entrepreneurial politics, have converged in the agenda of an Islamist party. The adoption by Islamist parties of modules of narratives and actions orphaned by the new global reality—and not in themselves specifically Islamic—is a common phenomenon across the world. In the case of Bangladesh, it is has been facilitated by a corrupt political system that makes all three pillars more appealing to the populace.

The tenuous link between these elements and Islamism as an ideology opens the field for a coherent challenge to Islamism in Bangladesh on terms that remain respectful of Islam. Islamism is not inevitably fated for success in Bangladesh. If democratically inclined parties were to espouse the methods that the Islamists have monopolized by default, the road to democracy in Bangladesh would be a much smoother one.

Moderate Islamism?

This is not to say that Bangladesh is free of rigid Islamist presentations that aim for far more than an acceptable social framework. Vocal, militant proponents of the dissolution of Bangladesh as an accountable state governed by its people have orchestrated attacks on public institutions and coordinated murders of public officials. If Jamaate can trace its organization and ideology to the coalescence of a twentieth-century Islamism, inspired and informed by the socialist and nationalist activism of the era, other Islamist groups in Bangladesh derive their organizational structure and ideological outlook from a twenty-first-century phenomenon, the radically subversive and actively destructive Al Qaeda movement.

Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh may be the flagship of such radical Islamist movements. Its rejection of Bangladesh as an entity is total. Its aim is to supplant the governance structure of the country by a caliphate-ruled, Shariah-based provincial structure, with the understanding that the sole entity of relevance is the totality of the Muslim Umma, the global community of believers. Instead of the populism of Jamaate, the JMB resorts to an acutely elitist (and avant gardist) approach in which the select few *mujahideen* (holy warriors) are entitled to determine the fate of the nation. Rather than promote a social service network, as Jamaate does, JMB seeks the destruction of all existing structures. State institutions are automatic targets; thus the JMB has bombed government offices and assassinated civil judges.[20] The JMB practices deterrence and punishment as its method for social change. Institutions, whether civil, commercial, or private, are targeted for terrorist action if deemed not in conformity with the JMB Islamist vision. And while many Jamaate leaders pride themselves on model ethical behavior, the JMB, without apology, recruits from the criminal fringes of society.[21]

At face value, the differences between Jamaate and the JMB could not be more pronounced. In every respect, the JMB and other radical Islamist groups are the antithesis of what Jamaate stands for, or presents itself as being. The paradox that new Islamist thinkers have dared confront is that the actions of both Jamaate and JMB are the product of the same ideological milieu. Neither group is an aberration in Islamism. Quite to the contrary, many of the "mild" positions espoused by Jamaate lay the ground for the harsh, criminal actions of JMB. Jamaate may consider its condoning, tolerating, or promoting of discriminatory language against minority groups, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Ahmadiyya, as permissible

under the general rubric of freedom of expression or ideological purity. But the words of Jamaate are translated into actions by the JMB and others—actions that kill. The comparison of Bangladeshi Hindu flight from their native land to "excrements leaving the body" is a dehumanizing and utterly repulsive invitation to dispose of a historically integral component of Bengali society. Rallies to "protest" Ahmadiyya mosques set the stage for twenty-first-century Bangladeshi-style lynching. Difference of opinion and theology is thus transformed into grounds for murder.

No amount of social service provision, model ethical living, and steadfast action to defend local culture can compensate for the damage to the nation for which Jamaate is responsible, directly or indirectly. Jamaate and moderate Islamists may dismiss these concerns as focusing on incidental aspects of their social transformation program. In reality, given the failure of Islamism to allow for the emergence of a genuinely liberal and tolerant component, these concerns are about an essential aspect of the ideology and the agenda. The mild Islamist agenda, which is based on components not specifically Islamist at all, is merely a preparation of the Bangladeshi field for the totalitarian regimentation that Al Qaeda wishes to impose on the Muslim Umma. There is no doubt that this agenda will fail. However, on its road to failure, it may waste the lives of many in Bangladesh, and dissipate the few economic opportunities that this tortured land has.

The Shariah state remains a hollow slogan. Islamists have not dared develop it, often out of fear of other Islamists. However, many techniques are in place to push Bangladesh, among other nations, on the path to a Shariah state. A serious challenge faces Bangladeshi Islamists of good faith: they must adjust their ideology to reflect the realities of the land or they risk setting their society on a path of misery. A more serious challenge faces others in Bangladesh—secularists, leftists, nationalists, and democrats. The population of Bangladesh is still not voting Islamist; it amounts to suicidal denial, however, not to recognize that the political culture in Bangladesh is now favorable to the Islamists. Let us acknowledge why this is so without insulting the intelligence of Bangladeshis. The cause is not Saudi money, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), or a U.S. conspiracy of one type or another. International interests are bound to exploit weaknesses in the country. It is, rather, the failure of democracy as a proposition, and the failure of the leftists, nationalists, secularists, and democrats, that have made support for the Islamist experiment, however qualified, a rational choice for Bangladeshi society. The Islamists' agenda may be incoherent and full of contradictions—but they alone among political movements in Bangladesh seem to *have* an agenda.

chapter five

The New Order and Islamism

Radical Islamism is the driving ideology of militant forces that have disrupted peace, security, and stability in the world and that are the target of the West's war on terror. Representing a range of political creeds that consider Islam relevant to the political process, Islamism includes many forms that blatantly reject democracy. Some of these forms condone—if not promote—violence. Those who are not themselves Islamists, however, make a distinction between Islamism, a political ideology, and Islam, the religion of one-fifth of the world's population. In particular, they seek to show that Islam is not incompatible with democracy, and thus they view with interest the democratic experiences of Muslim-majority societies.

For those who argue that Islamic societies can embrace democracy, Bangladesh, home to the world's third-largest Muslim population, has often been pointed to as a success story. Since 1991, for three consecutive terms, democratic governments have won mandates in Bangladesh in contested, competitive, and often raucous elections. It was in the interest of Bangladesh, as well as the world, to see this decade-and-a-half-long tradition continue. At the same time, it was clear to observers that Bangladeshi democracy was riddled with problems, especially corruption. The scheduled parliamentary elections of January 22, 2007, were approached with serious concerns from all sides; the likelihood of violent clashes between supporters of the two parties seemed high. Then, on January 11, 2007, eleven days before elections were to have been held, the military seized power, and an interim semi-constitutional government has been in control since that time. Its public facade is a civilian Council of Advisers, which gives an expanded role to the constitutionally mandated preelection caretaker government and which seeks to camouflage the fact that the military is the real decision-making authority, the power behind the scenes.

I refer to this interim government as Bangladesh's New Order. Although similar governments have appeared elsewhere, in Bangladesh it represents a new model. It can be described as semiconstitutional because the Constitution does not appear to explicitly prohibit this retention of a caretaker cabinet over the long term. Thus the New Order can argue that its actions are not in breach of the Constitution. It can equally be argued that the New Order is extraconstitutional because it exists in territory not covered by the Constitution. Bangladesh must now answer a fundamental "social contract" issue: is the government limited to those powers specifically granted by the Constitution, or does the Constitution's silence on powers—its failure to specifically forbid them—mean those powers are legally available?

The Demise of Democracy

A more immediately pressing question for Bangladesh, and the one explored in this chapter, is the extent to which Islamists will take advantage of the January 11 suspension of democracy to promote their agenda. In its most radical forms, Islamism rejects democracy and advocates violence as a means of establishing the Islamist conception of state. Bangladesh has a long history of moderate Islamist movements; these also seek the creation of a Shariah state, but they accept, or purport to accept, the democratic process as a means of establishing it. However, the recent global surge in militant Islamism has affected Bangladesh, which has experienced the emergence of smaller groups of a far more virulent character. The suspension if not outright demise of democracy in Bangladesh since the January 11 takeover opens the way for Islamists to assert themselves.

Makers of policy and opinion in the West, and in particular in the United States, ought to follow carefully the unfolding of events in Bangladesh; radical Islamists are surely paying attention. The slide towards the abyss that Bangladesh seems to be experiencing is not irreversible. Democracy has a chance. But other democratic governments, especially the United States, must shake off their usual indifference to Bangladesh and use their good offices to help the democratic forces within Bangladesh prevail.

It is important to understand the events that led up to the military takeover. Ahead of the election, the BNP-led government of Begum Khaleda Zia had created an infrastructure of electoral fraud: the electoral lists were doctored, local wards were set for a rigged performance, and the outcome of the national elections was to be a forgone conclusion. The opposition, led by the Awami League, convinced that it had exhausted all peaceful means to ensure free and fair elections, had declared an all-out protest, including *hartals*—politically motivated general strikes—and a siege of the capital city, Dhaka. Amidst calls from Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the opposition, for people to mobilize, and blunt assertions from close associates of hers that the elections would be stopped "even at the price of a civil war,"[22] the country seemed destined for violence, if not prolonged chaos.

Events on January 11, 2007, changed the country's direction and saved it from civil war: the Bangladeshi military, an institution professionalized and depoliticized over the course of a decade and a half, stepped out of the cantonment and into the political arena and effectively dictated the agenda to politicians and bureaucrats. After younger officers reportedly pressured their superiors for action, the army leadership met with President Iajuddin Ahmed, outlined a way out of the crisis, and asked the president to follow course. The president declared a state of emergency on January 11 and then opted not to be a member of the Council of Advisers. Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former governor of Bangladesh's central bank and former World Bank employee, now heads the government's civilian facade.

Fakhruddin Ahmed and most of his fellow council members are renowned in Bangladesh for their professionalism and patriotism. Their willing participation in this experiment in government can be attributed to their sense of duty as capable administrators and technocrats. Similarly, the action of military officers in interdicting an imminent confrontation, and possibly a civil war, has to be viewed as their response to a national emergency, not a bare grab for power. The Bangladesh Army has a deeply rooted sense of its national responsibility going back to its origins as the corps of freedom fighters that liberated the homeland from West Pakistani occupation.

The Army's Relationship with Islamists

It is precisely that experience in the Liberation War that complicates the army's relationship to the Islamists, who openly sided with the repressive West Pakistani forces during the war. However, in the course of the subsequent two decades, a number of factors, most notably the reemergence of the Bengali Islamic identity, helped to dilute what could have been an enduring animosity towards Islamism on the part of the military.

The reemergence of the Bengali Islamic identity may have been set in motion by a changed relationship with India. The Indian armed forces were partners with the emerging Bangladeshi military in the fight for the creation of the new nation, but once the war was won, India—a regional superpower that virtually surrounds Bangladesh—began to be regarded as a potential threat. As Bangladesh struggled to check Indian hegemony and to ensure a degree of genuinely indigenous decision making, there emerged in the military realm a portrayal of "the Indian" as the "other," or the external threat. For example, training targets for Bangladeshi soldiers were presented as turbaned human figures that unmistakably resembled Indian special forces.

A subtle shift in the Bangladeshi national self-conception accompanied the repositioning of India from friend to foe. While both Islam and Bengali nationalism were part of the mix of cultural ingredients that led to the formulation of Bangladesh as a national idea, the exploitation of East Pakistan by the Islamabad-led western wing had diminished the Muslim aspect of the East's identity, and thus enhanced the Bengali facet. Even after independence, the memory of exploitation continued to feed a withdrawal from Islamic identity. But as this memory faded over time and tensions with and concerns about India became more salient, Islam in its most generic sense—not as the politicized ideology promoted by Islamism—regained its status as the central element in the life of Bangladeshis.

Although Bangladesh's intellectual class and its increasingly cosmopolitan business and political strata have a vision of their country based on notions of Bengali nationalism and/or Bangladeshi patriotism, the self-understanding of the majority of the country is based on a traditional "soft" Islam. This fact has over time been accepted by the two main political parties,

the BNP and the Awami League, in spite of their respective nationalist and socialist pasts. For instance, both parties accommodate some Islamic symbolism. It should be underlined, however, that this accommodation is not as a result of Islamist pressure, but more a recognition of the reemerging role of Islam in Bangladeshi life. Thus the two phenomena—the restoration of "soft" Islam as part of Bangladeshi life after independence, and Islamist militancy—have to be viewed as parallel but independent phenomena. Through this restoration, Bangladeshi society in its own mild way was devising a fusion between the two poles of its identity. Had it not been for the inevitable extraneous factors (politics, as well as the international cultural influence) Bangladeshi society would have had the pendulum swing between the two poles come to a halt at a gentle center.

How has the army accommodated the reemergence of Islam as part of the Bengali identity? It is clear that the troops as well as the senior leadership of the Bangladeshi military—most of the latter participated in the War of Independence as nationalist freedom fighters—remain committed to the ethos of the formative years, one that idealizes Bangladesh as a heroic nation emerging from a bloody history. In all likelihood, it is this ethos that motivated many of the senior officers who engaged in the January 11 action to "save the nation" from corrupt politicians. The threat of an Islamist emergence in Bangladesh was often denied by the colonels and generals, who refused to acknowledge such a threat and viewed Islamism as contrary to the essence of Bangladesh, an essence perpetually portrayed in the context of the War of Liberation.

Yet as the nation has grown more sympathetic to Islam, so has the army. The Bangladeshi armed forces reflect the socioeconomic and cultural makeup of the nation, and anecdotal evidence and accounts from within the army point to the emergence of Islam, even Islamism, at the expense of Bangladeshi liberation-style heroism, within the rank-and-file of the army. It has often been reported that younger officers tend to be more religious, and that some have even shown explicit support for Islamist ideas.

Authoritarianism and Sound Governance

It is possible, moreover, to see another affinity between Islamism and the military. Islamism propounds a framework for the regimentation of society, i.e., it has an authoritarian strain. The military, where discipline and order are paramount, is inherently authoritarian.

At the same time, experience in other countries has shown that these two approaches to ordering society may not in fact work towards a common goal. In Turkey, for example, the military has posited itself as the ultimate guarantor of secularism against any Islamist incursion. It is noteworthy that in Turkey, the military antedates both state and Islamist institutions.

Algeria's military has also staunchly resisted compromise with Islamists, although the military's exclusion of the Islamists was a major factor in plunging the country into a devastating civil war in the 1990s, from which Algeria has never recovered.

Or consider Pakistan and Indonesia, which as Asian countries may be more relevant to Bangladesh. In Pakistan, a gradual increase in the entanglement between the military and Islamists was supposed to offset the political and factional divisions of the nation. Instead, it has weakened the notion of Pakistan and is contributing to its potential collapse as a conventional nation-state. In Indonesia, the reliance on Islamism was supposed to counter the leftist tendencies of the 1960s, which were ended by the emergence of Suharto, an anticommunist strongman. The association of the tamed Islamist formations with Suharto's autocratic state might have kept militant Islamism in check, but with the restoration of democracy in 1998 after the forced retirement of Suharto, Islamist groups became resurgent and now vie openly with more moderate parties for political and social influence.

It is not clear what direction the seeming alliance of two authoritarian elements in Bangladesh—Islamists and military—will take. In post-January 11 developments in Bangladesh, the New Order seems to be espousing the approach of the two main political parties, with professed commitment to human rights, democracy, and honest governance. But this is mostly lip service. Sound governance is emerging as the paramount value. Human rights and democracy are now relegated to a "foreseen" future to follow elections by the end of 2008. In the meantime, a revival of the notion of a heroic Bangladesh, as an echo of the War of Independence, is making its way back into official discourse. Absent from this mix is a recognition of the new status of Islam in Bangladeshi life, both in its conventional "soft" form and in its "hard" form along new Islamist lines.

Mainstream Islamists also explicitly support sound governance, at the expense of democracy and human rights, and as a vehicle for development. Indeed, one major reason for the appeal that Islamists have had at the grassroots level is their ability to deliver social services untainted by corruption. But the Islamists and the New Order have different motivations for this insistence on sound governance. For the latter, sound governance is a stepping-stone towards equitable development and theoretically real democracy. For the former, the insistence is of a moral character: it reflects the sociocultural order to which Islamism aspires, namely that of a religiously sound and Shariah-regulated society.

Despite the difference in motivation, the similarity in approach has offered an advantage to Islamists, who have been protected from the New Order's wholesale arrests of persons the military regards as politically suspect. From January 11 to mid-May 2007, the authorities took into detention 193,000 persons, according to Odhikar, a Bangladeshi human rights organization. Odhikar also reported that 96 persons "were killed" or died while in custody. To make room for these political prisoners in the jails, the New Order released numbers of common criminals. There is no prospect of early trials for the detainees, not least because the New Order has effectively shut down the courts.[23]

It may be argued that this common direction would work against the spread of Islamism: as the New Order succeeds in cleaning up corruption, the Islamists lose one main aspect of their appeal. However, the difference between the two formulations of sound governance—"rational towards development" for the New Order, and "moral towards social cohesion" for the Islamists—works in favor of the Islamists.

For them it is a win-win situation. Success in implementing measures to promote sound governance can be portrayed by the Islamists as a vindication of their approach. Alternatively, even if such measures are not successfully implemented, Islamists can still argue that there is at least a national consensus on the validity of their aims. The anti-rich populism that much of the media has engaged in, prompted by the desire of the New Order to keep the issue of corruption in the limelight, is compatible with the ideology of Islamists, who consider ostentatious displays of wealth to be immoral and repugnant.

The Islamists also appear to benefit from the New Order's efforts to stem corruption, which are focused on politicians in the BNP and Awami League who steal funds for personal gain. The Islamists can echo the criticisms of corruption in the political parties even as they engage in their own corrupt practices—the so-called virtuous corruption that misappropriate funds to better serve a constituency.

Perhaps most significantly, the New Order's suppression of political activity and speech represents a major gain for the Islamists. Under the New Order, "indoor politics"—private meetings in which political issues are discussed—are considered illegal. The New Order has also openly hinted at its determination to sideline Awami League president Sheikh Hasina and BNP chairman Khaleda Zia as political players. Press reports and persons close to the New Order have indicated that the military favors the creation of a new political party to replace the two major parties. However, the chances for such a scheme to succeed remain minimal, even if in the short term the marginalization of the "two ladies" seems to be working. The political class in Bangladesh, stunned by the military's January 11, 2007 move, did appear to comply with the New Order's edicts. However, this compliance was the result of the atmosphere of fear that the New Order instilled. It was not a newly acquired sense of political quietism.

This silencing of secular political debate and activity has catapulted Islamism to the status of the primary political movement in Bangladesh. Islamists have taken the view, so far not disputed by the New Order, that the banning of political activity does not prohibit *dawa*. Narrowly defined, *dawa* means missionary activity aimed at exhorting Muslims to follow more closely the precepts of their religion. But Islamism makes no distinction between Islam as a religion and Islam as state. Thus, *dawa* can also be Islamist political activity with plausible deniability. *Dawa*, with the mosque as a platform and as a place of reunion, can never be stopped by any government that professes to be Islamic.

The Islamists benefit in another way from the New Order's large-scale roundup of political activists. Due to the New Order's ban on political gatherings, no longer can the two parties hire thousands of demonstrators for "street theater" manifestations during *hartals*, the

politically motivated general strikes. Indeed, the loss of that income to the extent it causes hardship may lead to grassroots discontent with the New Order, which may in turn help Islamists in their quest for political power.

A Higher Good than Democracy

But the New Order has done more to aid Islamism, however inadvertently, than silence competing voices. Its own rhetoric in defense of actions that are not consistent with democracy serves both to strengthen and create a precedent for the Islamists' own position that democracy is not the highest good.

For example, the engineers of the New Order defended the takeover of the government without elections by saying that they acted in pursuit of a "higher purpose," a crusade against corruption.[24] Such claims establish a precedent that Islamists may invoke in the future: democracy can indeed be subordinated to a higher purpose. The assimilation of Islamism into the democratic process in Bangladesh and elsewhere has been through an approach that argued that Islamists are welcome to participate as long as they accept the principal of democracy as paramount. But the Islamists' acceptance of democracy thus far has appeared to be tactical; in other words, they will adhere to the rules of democracy in practice while advocating that there is a higher value, the establishment of a Shariah state, a state that operates within a framework of Islamic law, the law of the Quran.

Islamists may also invoke the New Order's dismissal of human rights. Prominent figures in the New Order have asserted that even "fundamental rights do not exist in a state of emergency," hence relegating putative universal rights to the status of privileges. This claim is consistent with what the Islamists have argued: that these rights are in reality not universal or inalienable, as they are derived not from a divine source but from human innovation.

In addition, the New Order's paternalism—its top-down approach to politics—is aligned with and reinforces Islamist thought, although Islamism identifies a different source of ultimate authority. The New Order has assaulted the basic notion of democracy as reflecting the sovereignty of the people over state institutions by calling for a local brand of democracy and by positioning the army and an unelected cabinet of technocrats as the shapers of this democracy. While the Bangladeshi practice of democracy over the past decade and a half has been flawed, it does reflect a national ethos of the supremacy of the popular will through the ballot box. Even if the Islamists shyly argued that divine order is the only perfect order; they did so without openly rejecting democracy. Their compromise hovered around the notion that Muslim society will voluntarily choose the establishment of a Shariah state, thereby preserving the supremacy of Shariah while not dethroning democracy as a process. This nuanced, even utopian, compromise is no longer needed. Democracy as a process is no longer sacrosanct.

Islamists on Trial

It should be noted that the New Order has pursued one strategy in explicit opposition to the Islamists: it has attempted to revive memories of their collaboration with the West Pakistanis during the Liberation War and to establish a war crimes tribunal that would hear cases involving Islamist leaders. For reasons that become clear below, this strategy is unlikely to have much effect.

In the Liberation War of 1971, Islamists in what became Bangladesh did indeed side with the colonizer, Pakistan, under a banner of Islamic solidarity. This major miscalculation ignored the particularities of the Bengali population of the Eastern Wing and condoned the Islamabad government's horrendous mistreatment of the Bengalis. Well into the 1980s and 1990s, the stigma of having been traitors to the motherland was regularly affixed to the Islamists of Bangladesh. By the turn of the century, however, with the memory of the independence era fading, and with democracy losing credibility through the systemic abuses committed by the two main political parties, the Islamists succeeded in distancing themselves from their past. Islamists even held public celebrations of Independence Day.

Neither the military brass nor the technocrats of the New Order seem to appreciate the success of the Islamists in disassociating their current activities from their former loyalty to Islamabad. In its campaign to establish itself as the voice of the nation, the New Order has revived the rhetoric of the independence era. The socialist content of the independence movement, born out of the massive disparity between local Bengalis and the West Pakistanis, has been redirected as anti-rich populism aimed at the entrepreneurial class. Similarly, the anti-Islamist component of Bengali nationalism, itself a result of Islamist disregard for Bengali suffering in the Pakistan era, has been revived as a promise of a war crimes tribunal against the Islamist collaborators. For all but a few older and more politically engaged intellectuals and politicians, however, this anachronistic targeting of 2007 figures with 1971 charges has had little effect.

This attempt at acting against the Islamist leadership certainly demonstrates a lack of collusion between the military and the Islamists. It cannot, however, be interpreted as reflecting an innate animosity toward the Islamists on the military's part. Instead, it illustrates a generation gap between some of the army leadership and much younger elements of the Bangladeshi population. It also reflects a gap between the army leadership and many young officers, who view Islamists as service providers and social ideologues, not counterrevolutionaries.

It is wrong, though perhaps tempting, to conceive of the military as the counterweight to the organized forces of Islamism. Some observers posit the "Pakistanization" of Bangladeshi politics, i.e., an interplay between "mosque" and military in which the military keeps the "mosque" in check. This view fails to see that, so far from constituting an element of control

over Islamism, the military adventure into Bangladeshi politics is likely to empower it, both within the military and in society at large.

The one real counterweight to Islamism in Bangladesh might be a citizen-centered democratic process, but Bangladeshi democracy has lacked such a process since 1991. By suppressing grassroots political activity, the New Order paves the way for Islamist advances.

Restoring Democracy

It is important to recognize that the current situation is likely to push Bangladesh towards more radicalization, and that only a restoration of the democratic process can reverse this tendency. Reform and the restoration of a citizen-centered democracy can happen only from within. The notion of paternalistic reform from above undertaken by a benign New Order is fallacious both in theory and in practice: the New Order does not have an effective formula for reform, nor is it capable of implementing one. By dismantling the democratic process, with the promise of rebuilding it "better" in the future, the New Order is merely legitimizing the Islamist agenda.

The responsibility of rescuing Bangladesh from an enduring erosion of its political culture and saving the army from further entanglement in a political process that is bound to lead it towards corruption, falls on the Bangladeshi political class. It may indeed be expecting too much to ask the politicians who have wreaked havoc on Bangladesh's democracy, and who are viewed by many as selfish and immature, to transcend their old selves and become national saviors. It should nonetheless be underlined that disparaging politicians has been a healthy sign of Bangladeshi political life. With all their shortcomings, Bangladeshi politicians, albeit imperfectly, have given the nation vehicles to express its needs and wants, and they need to step up now and act.

The military having saved the nation, it is now incumbent on the nation to save the military. A national salvation front is needed, a grand coalition that brings together the major political parties and that acts as a watchdog over the civilian component of the New Order, the caretaker government, to ensure that it fulfills its mission. That mission is to hold free and fair elections and to abide by the results. The sanctity and irrevocable supremacy of the democratic process have to be reenshrined in order to avoid the "Pakistanization" of Bangladesh or the application of any other failed model. The involvement of the military in political and economic dossiers, from anticorruption to legal reform, must be reversed.

The interest of Bangladesh, the South Asian region, and the world is in the prompt restoration of a democratically elected government, directly accountable to Bangladeshi society, not to some supposedly higher principle and value. It is incumbent on all friends of Bangladesh, and in particular the United States, to request a firm timetable for such a restoration of

democracy. The damage done by the New Order, which shares responsibility with the Bangladeshi political parties who blatantly abused the system, cannot be undone. But further damage can be prevented if Bangladeshi society is reassured that there is a fixed path to the restoration of the nation's custodianship of itself. No higher value can or should be advocated by Bangladesh's international partners, in particular the United Nations, the World Bank, and the United States.

Neither the Turkish model, in which the army is guarantor and custodian of the political process, nor the Pakistani model, in which the army is entangled in both politics and religion, need apply to Bangladesh. Despite its severe problems of corrupt governance, Bangladesh over the three and a half decades since independence has been on a progressive trajectory towards genuine democratic participation. Good intentions notwithstanding, no paternalism, whether militaristic or Islamist, is capable of curing the ailments of this young nation. Only an incremental democratic process can do so. Restoring it now is the only priority.

chapter six

Recommendations for Reform and Policy Implications

The main asset that the Islamists have secured and nurtured over the past few decades in Bangladesh is the disenchantment of the general public with politics as usual. It is possible to wonder, therefore, if the current military-backed regime's open campaign against politics as usual might be taking away from the Islamists their cherished advantage. The general public in Bangladesh largely welcomed the action of the military; whether in print, on internet blogs, or in street talk, Bangladeshis used analogies of sweeping and cleaning to describe the New Order's takeover. The hopeful conviction was that this action would yield a cleaner environment for politics, different from the corruption of the previous era.

Soon enough, however, cracks began to appear in the pristine image of the New Order. The expectation of a cleansing from corruption was not fulfilled, nor did politics as usual come to an end. The attempt of the New Order to induce change in the structures of political parties in fact worsened corruption, which went from mere looting and petty theft to subversion of the democratic process. Before the takeover, norms and rules were often merely ink on paper, neglected and bypassed by those in power. With the coming of the New Order, leaders claimed to play by the rules even while carrying out severe abuses—better camouflaged than in the past, and with international approval. The New Order could afford to play by the rules, because it effectively rewrote them.

The New Order at face value appears to have tapped into the source of disenchantment upon which the Islamists relied. In reality, however, the New Order has merely offered a false hope, which will result in even greater disenchantment for the Islamists to capitalize on once it dissipates.

A proactive strategy is needed to counter the New Order's failure to address the underlying causes of the country's problems. Not unlike the Islamist approach, this strategy has to be a program for generations. Quick fixes, whether military or otherwise, will not provide the depth of structural change that is required to reorient Bangladesh towards fulfilling the aspirations of its population. Such an effort is clearly not the responsibility of one individual, one political party, or one segment of Bangladeshi society. Instead, it is the collective responsibility of the nation as a whole, which can be fulfilled only in the context of recommitment to active participation in the political process.

The broad outlines of such a strategy have been discussed at length in Bangladeshi circles.

It is therefore possible to highlight its major components while adding a few more that have grown out of the lessons learned from the experiences of the New Order.

1. ***Address gender inequality not by focusing on women's dress, which only strengthens the Islamists' hand, but by working to ensure that women can earn a living.***

One main target of Islamist regimentation in Bangladesh (and elsewhere) has been the control of women. Building upon a few verses in the Quran that commend modesty and ignoring a multitude of other verses that are as applicable to men as they are to women, Islamist movements throughout the globe have made women in *hijab* the "mascot" of their success. The Islamist overhaul of society is exemplified by the boxing of women into a single role, that of mother; according to Islamist literature, the importance of women lies in their having responsibility for raising the future generations. This view denies women individuality, limits their ambition to what can be achieved in the home, and restricts them to the role of supporting the "next generation"—that is, the next generation of men.

This vision, and the regimentation that goes with it, have not spared Bangladesh. Historically, Bangladeshi culture has been egalitarian, offering woman relative freedom and choice in both private and public spheres, but the globalized brand of Islamism that conflicts with the Bengali version of Islam dismisses the Bengali egalitarian tendency as "Hindu." Needless to say, this accusation is not rooted in any objective examination but is aimed at creating a false dichotomy between the "Islamic" status of women as promoted by the Islamists and the "non-Islamic" behavior of women that is common in Bangladesh.

Since independence, women have assumed an important role in many spheres of Bangladeshi life. This is true across regions and social classes. From the highly educated, affluent urbanite of Dhaka, who is active in business, nongovernmental organizations, or public life, to the low-income manual laborer toiling in a garment factory to support her extended family, women in Bangladesh are active participants in socioeconomic life. The fact that both prime ministers in Bangladesh's democratic era (1991–2007) have been women might be merely symbolic. It does, however, send a message to women throughout Bangladesh that there is no limit set by their gender on any role they would like to assume.

Symbolic, too, is an event that took place in July 2007 in the remote Bangladeshi village of Satkhira, where a thirteen-year-old girl was slated to enter into an arranged marriage to an older man. Bound by filial obedience, she did not vocalize her objections, but her classmates, all thirteen-year-old girls, staged a public demonstration in their school and ultimately pressured the father to yield.[25] This story illustrates the sense of empowerment and the influence that even young girls can have in Bangladesh. Such an environment is anathema to the patriarchal, male-dominated order that the Islamists promote and work towards establishing in Bangladeshi society.

The Islamists are correct: the status of women in a society determines its susceptibility to succumbing to the Islamist program. Women as free individuals are both products and producers

of a free society that rejects regimentation. It is therefore not by accident that in the height of the radical Islamist terrorist campaign in the summer of 2005, women's groups—in particular rural women's groups, which are often more vulnerable—were targeted and threatened with murder.[26]

In response to the deliberate Islamist suppression of women in Bangladeshi society, many progressive activists, women and men alike, have adopted a confrontational attitude. They complain vocally, for instance, about the sporadic adoption of Islamic dress for women, such as the *hijab*, *niqab*, and *burqa*, and assert the universality of women's rights.

However, this confrontational approach actually serves the aims and strategies of the Islamist movement. By highlighting the "universal" aspect of the rights that they promote, the progressives allow Islamists to posit a false opposition between so-called universal values, which they see as manmade, and Islamic, God-given ones. The Islamists maintain that the "universal" values are in reality Western, i.e., Christian, and are acceptable in Bangladesh only to the Western-educated—read alienated—elite. On the other hand, from that same perspective, Islamic values are ingrained in the soil and the soul of the country.

The progressive attitude, moreover, is sometimes in contradiction with its espoused liberal values. The condemnation of some Islamic dress either as "imported" or as oppressive to women can be seen as insincere and chauvinistic—since Western dress is not equally condemned. It also neglects the fact that many women choose to wear this imported Islamic dress, whether for considerations of ideology, physical security, or even poverty (since the simple *hijab* covers a poorer woman's worn-out clothing). While no compromise is appropriate when it comes to affirming universal human rights and values, it is important not to give their detractors ammunition by adopting arguments that are themselves relativistic. Arguments for universal rights should take into account the constraints operating on the lower socioeconomic classes and on rural populations.

Confronting Islamism in its social dimension in Bangladesh has to focus on the status of women, but it is the empowerment of women as individual, productive, and full members of society that should be sought, not one type of clothing over another. Independent and productive women are in a position to decide for themselves what is best suited as a wardrobe. It is indeed offensive for the "enlightened" progressives who spot *burqa*-clad women in the streets of the capitol Dhaka to associate them and their hidden faces with images of women in captivity, lacking personality and a place in open society. The proper response to the *burqa* is to address the attempts of radical Islamists to confine women to roles in the private sphere where they are unable to generate income.

Women in Bangladesh overwhelmingly cannot afford to be relegated to a private-sphere role. As such, they are natural allies in the fight against the Islamists. It is thus imperative not to alienate them or appear distant from their sociocultural environment by insisting on an uncompromising "secularist" agenda. The focus should be on providing them the tools and means to help generate the income that their families require.

2. Do not let the Islamists dictate the terms of the debate; there is no dichotomy between Bengali culture and Islam.

The battle for women's empowerment, and the challenges involved in responding to women's situation in ways that do not inadvertently help the radical project, constitute a microcosm of the larger cultural battle that Bangladesh confronts. The struggle for women's rights plays out in Bangladesh in the context of Islamist efforts to posit a deep dichotomy, and create a conflict, between Islam as the religion of the land and Bengali culture as a leftover of pre-Islamic "Hindu" times.

The class dimension of this cultural conflict has been noted. Both the affluent and the poor are in their own ways steeped in Bengali culture, the former through patronage and sponsorship, and the latter through consumption. Two main groups have an interest in denigrating Bengali culture: the upwardly mobile urban lower-middle class and the rural second-tier elite. By rejecting Bengali culture, the former distinguishes itself from the poor and severs its client ties with the rich. As to the latter, by adopting the authority of religion against the manifestations of Bengali culture, members of this group themselves do exert influence over their rural constituency without recourse to the patronage expenses that Bengali culture demands. For this group, the recourse to religion is primarily a cost-saving measure.

Unfortunately, most opponents of the Islamist project in Bangladesh have fallen into the dichotomy trap. Even the assertion that Bengali Islam is different—an assertion that many progressives think of as a compromise between Islamism and secularism—implies that two notions are in conflict: (1) Bengali culture—with or without its particular kind of Islam; and (2) absolute or pristine Islam—one which the Islamists promote. This implicit representation is a dangerous, unwarranted concession to Islamism. "Bengali Islam" is indeed different from the vision that Islamists promote, but so is every other expression of Islam worldwide.

In its uniqueness and local flavor, "Bengali Islam" is indeed the universal Islam: the truth is that Islam, historically and across the whole Muslim world, has been warm to local expressions, fusing with them and generating through them a world of intellectual riches and cultural wealth. The novelty in the twentieth century, one that has its roots in European statism and totalitarianism, is the Islamism promoted by the radicals. If any conception can indeed be considered "Western" or even "Christian" in the pejorative sense used by the Islamists, it is their Islamism, with its reliance on Stalinist organization and Trotskyite ideology. Bengali Islam or simply Islam in Bangladesh, internally multifarious and diverse, is an expression of Bengali history, one deeply ingrained in the social mores and ritual practices of the population. The efforts of the Islamist project are in contradiction with its texture and wealth. If no dichotomy were posited between Bengali culture and Islam, most Bangladeshis would be natural allies in resisting and rejecting Islamist reductionism.

Rather than resorting to token mullah representation in anti-Islamist efforts, progressives would be better served by pursuing their own global outlook; they should seek forward-

looking Muslim thinkers as partners and allies in the attempt to redefine the cultural debate as one between reductionism and diversity as opposed to one between Islam and traditional Bengali culture. Reclaiming Islam without succumbing to the trap of adopting a religiously based discourse will remain a major main challenge for Bangladeshi culture for the next generation.

3. ***Address within the context of Bangladeshi society the challenges posed by the return of migrant workers from the Gulf; do not let the Islamists exploit this issue.***

This challenge of reclaiming Islam, already complex, is further complicated by the fact that it is not only ideologues who are importing Islamism into Bangladesh. Returning migrant workers often inadvertently introduce Islamist ideologies into their communities. Fueled by their oil revenue, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have undergone spectacular development in the last few decades, and it is Bangladeshi laborers, largely unskilled but driven by the desire to improve the lot of family members at home, who fill many jobs in the Gulf region's construction sector and service industries.

What is the situation in which Bangladeshi workers find themselves while in the region? In Saudi Arabia and beyond, the local religious establishment has entered into a partnership with the monarchy to develop institutions of social control. The rentier nature of the Saudi state has proven to be a convenient way for the religious establishment to drain resources and further strengthen its control. The exportation of the literalist, puritanical Islam of the Saudis to nations around the world is made possible by Saudi money and is in fact an aberration, since local versions of Islam have tended to prevail in the Muslim world. The reaction of Muslim communities across the globe to efforts to spread the Saudi version of Islam has depended on local conditions. Where local elites were less responsive to social demands, more of the new ideology was taken in. Where social harmony was more established, the ideology had little if any effect.

The case of Bangladesh, where social harmony and poverty coexist, is complex. The country's resistance to the influx of reductionist ideologies, a function of its social cohesion, is somehow weakened by its economic need. The effect of returning migrant workers on Bangladesh is itself also complex. Often having faced discrimination, bias, and plain racism in the host countries, returning migrant workers exhibit behavior that is best understood through a meticulous social, cultural, and psychological analysis.[27] For the purposes of this discussion, it is enough to suggest some of the reasons why the return of these workers helps to spread the values of the religious institutions in the Gulf States.

First, it is important to recognize that even minimal Arabic-language skills, which workers might have acquired in the course of their sojourn, are a marketable asset in a religious or Islamist environment in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi who cashes in on this asset on his return becomes a more likely Islamist constituent. Second, the plight of returning migrant workers is considerable. Because their long absence from Bangladesh may have dislocated them from

their place in society and even in their families, they may use an apparent attachment to Saudi values as a means to restore lost status at home. Moreover, if in the course of his absence a worker's wife has joined the workforce and has thus become more independent, he may consider this change a threat to his authority—a threat that can be dealt with through the Islamist insistence on the man as head of the family.

Bangladeshi society in its own internal dynamics is capable, organically, of resolving these tensions. The sole concern here is whether the Islamist project can find a way to exploit them, and the indications are that it can. From an Islamist perspective, the Saudi-imbued attitude of the returning migrant worker and the putative aversion of this worker to Bengali culture are confirmations of the dichotomy that the Islamists posit between their view of Islam and the Bengali practice of it. What is omitted in this picture is the fact that the cultural attitudes and artifacts that adorn the returning worker are not purely Islamic in any sense, but rather Saudi.

It is ultimately a matter of assigning value—that is, of understanding Bangladeshi and Saudi Islam as equally valid. The Saudi outlook of the returning migrant worker might be perfectly suited to—because it's rooted in—Saudi culture. In Bangladesh, however, it presents a dissonance that is often obfuscated by Islamist discourse. Both the Bangladeshi educational system and local Bangladeshi religious leaders need to stress the fact that Saudi and Bengali expressions of Islam alike are equidistant from Islam's original expression in the time of the Prophet Mohammad. The distance that Bengali Islam might have traveled as a result of linguistic considerations is equal to the distance that Saudi Islam has traveled for historical reasons. Bengali Islam is not the younger sibling of its Saudi counterpart; it is an independent yet integral part of the multitude of the religion's manifestations. Insistence on the equal validity of Bengali Islam can counter the destructive impulse of reductionist Islamism in Bangladesh.

4. ***Work to alleviate poverty.***

The economic dynamics, within the family, the locality, and the nation, determine more than anything else whether any native formulation of development and progress will succeed. Poverty alleviation, therefore, remains the paramount task for any program of national integration. Bangladesh has been described as a household capable of attending to its two major periodic bills: food and fuel. At one point in history a land of famine, Bangladesh, despite spectacular population growth, is potentially self-sufficient in food production, with export capacity. Its gas reserves give the promise of self-sufficiency in energy. Surplus thus generated can incrementally transform this land of the once wretched into a well-to-do society.

Environmental concerns, both regional—such as the deforestation in Nepal—and global —in particular the possibility of rising sea levels—are major challenges for Bangladesh's potential prosperity. However, the sum total of all challenges and opportunities is still positive. The future of Bangladesh should be debated within the country itself and not be relegated to the realm of bureaucrats, World Bank employees, and any and all paternalistic parties.

5. *Work to strengthen the national civic sense and weaken the hold of dynastic politics.*

If Bangladeshis themselves were to participate more actively in the national discourse, they would likely have a more optimistic, forward-looking outlook on their country. Instead, pessimism reigns, and the utopian vision promoted by the Islamists—a vision detached from concrete local considerations—gains appeal. Bangladeshis should not be limited to a choice between a Shariah state and politics as usual; they are entitled to weigh the real possibility of a prosperous future in the mix of possible scenarios that are presented to them.

In this respect, political parties in Bangladesh have failed to fulfill their expected mission. Instead of offering the citizenry alternatives for the future, political parties have mostly been vehicles for local and national leadership. The dynastic character of both leading parties underlines the fact that both parties have remained past oriented, i.e., have derived their legitimacy from their respective founders and their roles in the emergence of the nation.

Nor can dynastic politics in Bangladesh simply be dismissed as an archaic remnant of a feudal past. Bangladeshi society lends its endorsement to dynastic leadership for immediate reasons. Lacking trust in state institutions that have no track record of service delivery, the Bangladeshi voter rationally places his hope in the trusted name and family of a proven leader. Naturally, it is in the dynastic leadership's interest to preserve the public trust in the *name* as opposed to allowing the transfer of trust to state institutions. Both major Bangladeshi political parties have downgraded parliamentary practice. Even in the democratic era parliamentary activity was perpetually hampered by the absence of the opposition and by the ruling party's insistence on monopolizing effective power and state institutions. The Bangladeshi citizen who faces this reality, however unpleasant, has to concede that his or her interests are better served through allegiance to a party, not the state.

The major failure in politics in Bangladesh since its emergence may very well be the lack of a common civic sense that would place the nation and the state ahead of party and dynastic family in political culture. It is the youth of Bangladesh as a nation-state that is the first cause of this lacuna. Bangladesh as a state was founded by charismatic revolutionary leadership. Through the successive regime changes of its first decade and the military rule of its second, Bangladesh never offered its citizens the ability to place their trust in the state. The restoration of democracy in 1991 was an opportunity to deepen the nation's civic sense. Alas, it was a missed opportunity. The current regime, propped and backed by the military, seems to be aware of the considerable deficit in civic sense that has accumulated during the democratic era. However, its corrective actions are still largely a revolutionary overhaul. Imposed from above, these actions seem to summon the Bangladeshi citizen into a condition of obedience and compliance, but not of trust. In fact, many of the actions of the current military-backed government amplify the lack of trust.

The attempt of the military-backed government to induce "reforms" in the political parties might appear at first a step towards ending dynastic politics. The wishful thinking here is

that with the discarding of dynastic politics, a political system based on allegiance to the state will emerge. This wishful thinking is based on a major misconception—that is, the confusion between allegiance to the ruling power and allegiance to the state. Forced into implementing reforms, the two parties are not organically developing a national civic sense. Instead they are reorienting themselves to navigate the new maze of constraints and controls imposed openly or subtly by the military. This does not amount to placing the nation ahead of the party. A corollary to this situation is that any weakening of the new power will see the two reformed parties revert to old patterns without the safety net of dynastic leadership, a net that provided the voter and citizen with *some* assurance of delivery of services.

The new configuration does provide equilibrium: with military power in place, the newly reformed, decapitated parties will adhere to norms set by this power. However, if military control of the political scene were to be relinquished, the two parties would revert to systemic abuse of politics, but now without the assurance for minimal delivery of service that dynastic leadership provided. In other words, the new equilibrium is predicated on military rule. Bangladesh should have evolved from dynastic politics to civic-sense politics. It did not. The attempt at jolting it away from dynastic politics might yield, by necessity, an autocratic regime.

Political parties in Bangladesh should take these dynamics into account in their consideration of reform. Even before the action of January 11, 2007, the political establishment in Bangladesh agreed on the need for reform but had neither the impetus nor the common vision to carry it out. With the suspension of political life—the ban on "indoor politics" now impedes even the fundamental right of a citizen to express opinions in *private*—the impetus for reform is clear. Political parties need not agree on a common vision but must agree to what is effectively the unstated social compact of Bangladesh, one that includes democracy, social and economic rights, and above all, the rule of law. Many previously politically active citizens of Bangladesh have effectively conceded to the New Order by withdrawing from political life, or by waiting on the side. Nation-states are born out of collective national action at defining moments. Bangladesh was born out of a sense of community among the citizens of what was then East Pakistan, against oppression and genocide. A new defining moment has to be the reclaiming of democracy for Bangladesh. Whether the guiding force is liberal, nationalist, socialist, or even nonradical Islamist, the moment for claiming back democracy is now.

6. *Strengthen civil society organizations so they complement government institutions.*

It seems almost tautological to assert that good governance is the means to instilling civic sense. In fact the relationship between the quality of governance and the level of civic commitment is dialectical. One is nurtured by the other. However, good governance does not involve only political leadership. It also involves effective functioning of the multitiered state bureaucracies that extend from the national capital all the way to the remotest of villages. The corrosion of national politics has interdicted the proper evolution of an already weak civil

service sector. In the Pakistan era, ensuring good public service in the eastern wing was not a priority of the Islamabad government. Since independence, no distinction has been made between party affiliation and service in the public sector. After one party gained power, it routinely dismissed public servants who were affiliated with its opponent. This lack of distinction between politics and government is a fundamental problem: it guarantees that there is no continuity and institutional memory in state agencies and ministries, and it creates and nurtures instead a culture of vindictiveness and entitlement.

It is not an accident that the current project of structural reform in Bangladesh is being undertaken by the one institution that has been exempted from political machinations since the 1991 restoration of democracy: the military. The need to ensure the depoliticization of the military in 1991, after a decade of military rule, laid the ground for the redesign of the military along professional, nonpartisan, and nonpolitical lines. While both political parties maintained ties with senior officials in the military, the professionalization of the armed forces, and the new role that they eventually acquired as major providers of peacekeeping personnel for the United Nations, kept them largely out of the political game. It is therefore both paradoxical and destructive that it was the military that took action once the need to depart from politics as usual was recognized.

The paradox of this situation lies in this: while the army may indeed have been the sole institution in the nation not tainted by politics as usual, and as such the only institution that the public would trust to intercept the old corrosive political patterns, the very act of taking over the government immediately jeopardizes and even destroys what made the army trustworthy to begin with, its abstinence from politics.

The Bangladeshi community, polity and society, has to recognize that the lack of a structural framework distinguishing government and politics cannot be resolved through a quick fix, nor can it be resolved by a top-down approach. The example of leadership is crucial. However, to expect this example to filter down on its own, or through coercive means, is to believe that society is far more malleable than what the historical record demonstrates. Society may seem to comply in the short term, but upon a change in conditions old habits will reemerge.

The solution, instead, is to recognize that the reform project will take time, and to create a combination of incentives and deterrents at all levels of government. It is not enough to seek to punish public servants in the manner the New Order is engaging in. It is far more important to create cycles of service at the local level, monitored by citizens, as a means to determine reward and punishment. The building blocks for such an approach are already in place in Bangladesh, where civil society organizations have made considerable strides in the course of the past decade and a half.

The evolution of the global civil society movement has generally followed one of two models. In the first, civil society organizations have provided services and assumed functions that state institutions have failed to assume or provide. In the second model, civil society organ-

izations have cooperated with state institutions to complement and optimize services and functions already in place, albeit inadequately. Whether a civil society in a particular setting follows one or the other model can be viewed as a measure of the maturity of the political system. Where the first model operates, there is obviously an underlying failure of the state. Where the second model operates, state institutions can potentially be reformed and strengthened. In the case of Bangladesh, it was largely the first model that was adopted, underlining the many failures of the political system.

In settings where the first model is adopted, a dilemma emerges. By providing an alternative path to services, civil society organizations take away from state institutions both the incentive to reform and potentially qualified personnel. In addition, by relying on funders and donors from outside the local context, civil society organizations effectively create a self-reinforcing cycle of dependence. This in turn tends to amplify the negative aspects of state institutions. The challenge in the next phase is for efforts to reform civil society to complement initiatives undertaken by state institutions, starting at the local level. In Bangladesh, the political parties have a particular role to play in that respect.

While the state may have failed at the local level, the political parties have succeeded in creating an infrastructure, albeit one aimed at mobilization and political activism. It may be possible to couple this grassroots potential with the world-class savvy that many national civil society organizations have acquired. The combination may very well be able to mobilize society towards developing lasting, sustainable, service-providing state institutions. For such a proposition not to remain in the realm of utopia, the parties must engage in genuine institution building; must focus on state structures; and must be reform minded, with the understanding that such thinking is ultimately in the interest of the party itself. Progress towards structural reform at the state level in Bangladesh is not, in spite of what most Bangladeshi politicians seem to believe, a zero sum game.

chapter seven

Towards a Proactive Strategy with an International Dimension

The outlines of a solution for Bangladesh's endemic problems have to account both for their internal focus and for the international entanglement in the affairs of Bangladeshi society. Addressing gaps in the government's provision of services to the citizenry remains the primary challenge as Bangladesh moves towards *state* building. The multifaceted nature of this effort has been outlined in the previous chapter. However, this managerial challenge is only the operational dimension of the *nation* building that Bangladesh is bound to undertake in order to move forward.

It is self-evident that nation building takes place along a number of different tracks: political, economic, social, cultural, and administrative. *That these tracks are interrelated and influence one another militates against any jolting to the system through "revolutionary" focus on one track to the exclusion of others.* This faulty approach is indeed what the New Order seemed to engage in: having decided that corruption was the main cause of the country's failure to develop and achieve prosperity, it embarked on a crusade (or maybe a Jihad) to obliterate it The predicament is that corruption is not an entity by itself; it is the product of social norms, themselves informed by economic realities and cultural values, which affect the political system and afflict all levels of administration. Targeting corruption is similar to seeking to cure a disease by fighting its symptoms, not its causes.

The New Order also erred in relying on punishment alone to root out corruption. As a result of this approach, the entrepreneurial class has been dismantled; and productive elements of society that had to condone or actually engage in practices later termed corrupt have been scared away. If instead a system using both reward and punishment had been *organically* adopted—that is, promulgated by regulations and not imposed by force—the likely result would have been an alteration in the behavior of public servants, and Bangladesh would not be paying the heavy price of economic dislocation. The distinction between these two methods of tackling corruption is not merely in the shape of their details, but is also, and more importantly, in the philosophy behind them. An organic system of reward and punishment implies a trust in the ability of society to seek its own interest incrementally. over time. A heavy-handed system of punishment, on the other hand, sees the coercive power of the state as the agent of change.

The Importance of Respecting Democracy

It is clear that Bangladeshi society has already rejected this heavy-handed rule by an unelected government (whether or not the riots of August 2007 were instigated by outside agitators). This fact should serve as a lesson, not just to the military officers newly tempted by positions of political power, but also to the international community that has blessed the actions of the military and provided financial and political support for their undemocratic rule. It is a paradox, if not an instance of hypocrisy, that international players whose own tradition is democratic, involving rule by the citizen, rule of law, and government accountability have been promoting an arrangement in Bangladesh that involves none of these—and this is the case despite the fact that Bangladesh, on its own and in its short history, has internalized much from this tradition.

A basic premise for approaching Bangladesh and seeking any framework for the resolution of its problems should be unequivocal respect for its democratic structures and inclinations, as well as implicit trust in Bangladeshi society's ability to seek its own interest. Applying this principle at the international level means that the international community must postpone any consideration of structural assistance until an elected government is in place in Bangladesh, and must restrict the interaction with an unelected government to preparing the grounds for swift elections. The international community must recognize, too, that only an incremental approach to solving Bangladesh's problems—one that over time produces tangible, measurable results, that is self-propelling and sustainable, and that creates more stakeholders who then replicate the process—is likely to succeed.

Rule by an unelected body will not stand in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi society will act—whether chaotically, through improvised riots and strikes, or more methodically, through political activism—to counter it. External support for the unelected government might be conceived as a way of providing assistance to Bangladeshi society; but this is a blatant misconception. Such support will only prolong the agony of Bangladeshi society's struggle to rid itself of an unelected government and delay the much-needed efforts to address the country's long-term problems. Indeed, these problems will only be exacerbated by the top-down, paternalistic "solutions" the unelected government is introducing.

The adolescence of Bangladeshi political culture came to an abrupt end through what can be termed a rite of passage on January 11, 2007. Exasperated with the excesses of the political class, Bangladeshi society initially condoned the actions of the military (although it is now reasserting its demand for an accountable political system). A major challenge facing the political class is how to offer Bangladeshi society, which has in the span of a few months rejected

both the adolescent political behavior of the main political parties and the paternalistic authoritarianism of the military, alternatives that respect both its interests and its demands for the future.

The evolution of the Bangladeshi political parties since the collapse of the Soviet empire has been towards the homogenization of both discourse and policy. The BNP and the Awami League became tied to the interests of competing segments of the entrepreneurial class, and the Awami League moved away from its historical identification with the working classes. While previously the Awami League could be placed more on the left and the BNP more on the right of the political spectrum, by the early 1990s this was no longer the case. The entrepreneurial class became well-endowed in representation, with two competing political parties vying for its support. The working-classes, on the other hand, were largely abandoned—except for the patronage system that both parties had developed.

The Role of the Political Parties

Although I and a few other researchers noted the void that such a situation created, along with the opportunity for Islamists to fill it, we could not have anticipated that the Bangladeshi military would itself resort to such populist tactics as "rich bashing" to strengthen its hold on power after January 11, 2007. Lesson number one, therefore, for the main political parties is this: do not ignore the working classes and leave them prone to such populist rich-bashing; patronage systems are mere gap-filling measures. Viable, interest-driven policy that addresses the concerns of the average Bangladeshi citizen is a must to guarantee the nation's survival not only vis-à-vis Islamists, but more generally in the face of any authoritarian threat. The second lesson for the main political parties is that the laissez-faire attitude toward the practices of the entrepreneurial class must end and a system to ensure accountability must be established. As much as the entrepreneurs have helped to propel Bangladesh forward economically, they have at the same time only worsened the country's culture of corruption.

Many other lessons at the political, economic, social, cultural, and administrative levels can be derived from the current situation. It is the duty of the Bangladeshi political parties to develop coherent plans that are informed by these lessons. Following a hiatus necessitated by what seemed to be popular support for the action of the army on January 11, 2007, it was the responsibility of the political parties to step forward and assert that they, not the unelected caretaker government, represent the popular will. The political parties should have formed a national political group to monitor the actions of the unelected New Order and insist that these actions move solely towards the restoration of democracy. The fact that they did not reflects deeply rooted divisions between the political parties and their understandings of both their own and national interests. The ability to transcend this narrow perspective is in itself

a test of the maturity of these political parties and their capacity to offer Bangladesh's citizens genuine representation.

Ultimately, what the experience with the military takeover tells both the Awami League and the BNP is adjust or perish. Since its accession to power, the military has undertaken many measures aimed at the dismantling of these two main parties. Even if these measures are temporarily effective, they are ultimately bound to fail as top-down impositions against the popular will. However, the survival of these political parties is not guaranteed, and the demise of one or both will stem not from military action, but from an inability to learn the lessons of this crucial year. The two main parties, as well as less prominent others, have to help restore democracy to Bangladesh if Bangladeshi society is not to dismiss them. Without this collaborative action, new political contenders will enter the scene—not prompted or supported by the military, but generated out of the chaotic grassroots that is opposing military rule.

It is clear that Islamist movements have been the savviest at handling the current situation. In the pre-January 11, 2007, era these movements had presented Islamism as an antidote to the corrupt politics of the democratic system. With popular discontent over the military's trepidation in reform growing, Islamists are bound to reassert their ideological framework as the proper alternative for the country. It is therefore incumbent on the mainstream political parties to articulate a vision for a way out of authoritarianism, without falling back into the corrosive politics as usual that took Bangladesh to a dead end.

Only when they realize the primacy of local concerns will the Bangladeshi political parties avoid the repetition of two mistakes: waiting each other out—that is, tolerating a destructive setup such as military rule with the hope that it will damage the opponent; and encouraging conflict between other Bangladeshi political parties and outside forces, primarily India and Pakistan. These courses of action have done little good for either party, and they have damaged the nation as a whole. It would be naïve to expect political players to abandon such established tools as international alliances and political gambles, but we can hope that recent events will prove to all that the reckless utilization of such tools is, at best, undesirable.

I should note, once again, that Jamaate, the main Islamist party in Bangladesh, has succeeded in avoiding the most damaging aspects of these political games. Jamaate was thriving in the pre-January 11 era, and it has remained standing and virtually unharmed since. It is also unlikely to be hurt by any resolution to the current political situation. This compounds the challenge for mainstream political parties. Their strategy cannot be to hurt, damage, or undermine Jamaate. Instead, they should ensure that their political competition does not exclude it: mainstream parties have to develop and articulate comprehensive programs that confront and compete with the Jamaate's proposed solutions.

The international community can aid Bangladesh's political parties by providing all political players with the space to develop and discuss effective solutions to the nation's short- and long-term problems (thereby denying the absurd ban on "indoor politics" and other self-destructive measures imposed by the New Order). The provision of such space might

help mitigate reprisals against current actors in Bangladesh, reprisals that are aided and abetted by prominent government officials and institutions of the international community. If this issue is not addressed, no one should be surprised to see acts of vengeance being committed for years to come.

The most basic duty of the international community, finally, may be to start treating Bangladeshis as true global citizens, and not as the lesser, younger siblings of their Western counterparts. Respect for Bangladesh's struggle to achieve democracy thus far demands no less. ■

endnotes

[1] Other studies have focused on other aspects of Bangladesh, including its political economy and political culture. See, for example, Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution* (London: Zed Press, 1979).

[2] Private conversation with the author, Washington DC, November 20, 2006.

[3] Election results in the 1970s indicate that the Jamaate won by a 12 percent margin. The electoral share of Jamaate may have remained constant over time, but with cultural radicalization the appeal of Jamaate increases, laying the ground for considerable *future* gains.

[4] This attitude is in contradistinction to that of the Salafist movement, which posits Shiism as a heretical phenomenon that cannot be reconciled with Islamic plans and necessities.

[5] Fazlur Rahman, emir of the Jihad movement in Bangladesh, is among the many Bangladeshi militants trained in Afghanistan. See "Crusade Against Jews and Christians," World Islamic Front Statement, February 23, 1998, http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm (accessed August 28, 2007).

[6] The current official name of the state, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, is a remnant of the revolution's socialist context.

[7] General Zia assumed an important military role in the fight for Bangladeshi independence. Later narratives try to supplant the commonly accepted notion that Sheikh Mujib was the Father of the Nation by highlighting the role of General Zia in the struggle for independence after Sheikh Mujib's arrest by the Pakistani government.

[8] In the early 1970s, George Harrison of the Beatles and the Indian pundit Ravi Shankar organized the "Concert for Bangladesh" to raise awareness of the ongoing famine in Bangladesh. For many in the Western world, this was their first exposure to this nation.

[9] For an overview of the economic evolution of Bangladesh, see A. H. Sahadat Ullah, *Economic Policy Evolution in Historical Perspective in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: HIID/ESEPP Project, Plainning Commission, 1998).

[10] Private conversation with the author, Washington, DC, June 19, 2005.

[11] BBC, "Bangladesh Bomb Kills Nine," April 14, 2001,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1276726.stm (accessed August 29, 2007).

[12] The Bangladesh Constitution is regarded as a Western or "Christian" document that does not conform to Shariah and therefore may be dismissed.

[13] BBC, "Bangladesh Bans Islam Sect Books," January 9, 2004,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3382931.stm (accessed September 9, 2006).

[14] The Hindu population of Bangladesh has been decreasing at an alarming pace. See Hindu, Buddhist, and Christianity Unity Council, *Bangladesh: A Portrait of a Covert Genocide* (New York: May 2004).

[15] See chapter six for a fuller discussion of Bangladeshi women's situation under Islamism. Following an incident in which "improperly" dressed women were attacked with acid, Delawar Hossain Saidee, a Jamaate member of parliament, declared at a public rally that not a single victim was a woman in *hijab*. See "Not One Acid-Victim Was a Woman in Hijab," (Dhaka) *Amader Shomoi*, December 9, 2005. See also Feminist Daily News Wire, "Islamic Groups in Bangladesh Protest Women's Participation in Sports," December 2, 2004, http://www.feminist.org/news/newsbyte/uswirestory.asp?id=8775 (accessed September 9, 2006).

[16] Members of the ruling coalition have referred to journalists as "terrorists and toll collectors." See (Dhaka) *Daily Star*, "BNP MP Asks Locals to Beat Up Journalists," October 14, 2005.

[17] Cited in Martin Bright, *When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries* (London: Policy Exchange, 2006), 22.

[18] See the article "Fiqh" in the Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition (Leiden, 1954 - 2005).

[19] Private conversation with the author, Dhaka, November 26, 2005.

[20] Anti-Defamation Committee, "Suicide Bombers Target Courthouse In Bangladesh," http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/bangladesh_court_bombing_113005.htm (accessed September 4, 2007).

[21] Bangla Bhai, with his extensive criminal record, has become the archetype of the JMB activist. Combining ruthlessness and presumed ideological strictness, Bangla Bhai engages in unconscionable actions, and is still defended and promoted as a militant.

[22] Private conversation with the author, Virginia, December 2006.

[23] Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: Stop Killings by Security Forces," http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/01/25/bangla15182.htm (accessed August 2, 2007).

[24] Zillul Hye Razi, "The State of Emergency: Riding a Tiger?" *Probe News Magazine* 5, no. 36, March 2007, http://www.probenewsmagazine.com/index.php?index=2&contentId=2249 (accessed September 4, 2007).

[25] BBC News, "Child Wedding Stopped by Pupils," http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6897188.stm?lsm (accessed July 13, 2007).

[26] American Chronicle, "The Scenario: Human Rights in Bangladesh," April 4, 2007, http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/viewArticle.asp?articleID=23533 (accessed August 24, 2007).

[27] Nazli Kibria of Boston University is conducting such a quantitative analysis through field studies and sociological modeling.

$12.95

This book, conceived long before the takeover of the political system by the Bangladeshi Armed Forces on January 11, 2007, was intended to address the long-term challenges to the culture and practice of democracy in this young South Asian nation. While the post-takeover reality introduces a multitude of new factors, some of which intensify and some of which work against previous trends, the fact is that the challenges to Bangladeshi democracy remain essentially the same. The new reality has merely reshuffled many issues; it would be as dangerous to consider this new episode of military rule in Bangladesh a panacea for the nation's troubles as it would be reckless to call it an ill that supersedes all other ills.

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