The Rising Tide of Islamism in Bangladesh
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On August 17, 2005, three hundred bombs detonated almost simultaneously throughout Bangladesh. The massive attack sent shockwaves across Bangladesh, the third largest country in the Muslim world. Since then, Islamist-inspired violence in Bangladesh has escalated. At least five people were killed and more than 50 wounded in two December 8, 2005 bomb attacks in Netrokona, in northern Bangladesh. In the last week of November, three bombs exploded near courthouses and a law office in the cities of Gazipur and Chittagong. Two days later, a suicide attack in Gazipur was followed by the discovery of nine bombs near government buildings in the south of the country that were eventually defused by police. According to media reports that same week, the British diplomatic mission in Dhaka received a threat from someone claiming ties to al-Qaeda against its building as well as those of the United States and other European countries. In mid-November, two judges were assassinated by bombs.

The radical Islamist group believed to be behind the August attacks, the Jamaatul Mujahidin (Party of Holy Warriors), is similar to other militant Islamist groups around the world. In a political pamphlet outlining its agenda, the group rejected any accommodation with non-Muslims and democratic government, calling instead for the implementation and enforcement of Islamic law:

In a Muslim country there can be no laws other than the laws of Allah... The Quran or hadith [examples from the Prophet’s life] do not recognize any democratic or socialist system that is enacted by infidels and non-believers... [We] reject the constitution that conflicts with Allah’s laws and call upon all to abandon the so-called election process and run the affairs of state according to the laws of Allah and the traditions of the Prophet.¹

These are extremely worrisome developments, especially in Bangladesh, a country long thought to be a place of traditional Islamic moderation and
tolerance. In recent years, Islamist political parties and terrorism have emerged as increasingly visible and destabilizing forces in the country. Their rise has been facilitated by the combination of several factors, including the increased infiltration of foreign-funded Salafist organizations, as well as the impact of returning of Bangladeshi migrant workers who have been imbued with Salafist ideas during their stays in the Middle East. Even more worrisome is that the Bangladeshi government has only just begun to face these grave realities. In fact, it is not clear whether any response from the government, which continues to be plagued by political impotence and entrenched corruption, will be effective in dealing with the threats posed by Islamism and radical Islam. A recent analysis in *Jane’s Intelligence Review* has described Bangladesh as “on the brink of being a failed state,” and warned of its vulnerability to “al-Qaeda and its ever-expanding network of Islamic extremist organizations.”

For reasons both understandable and also regrettable, U.S. policymakers dealing with South Asia have focused their attention almost exclusively on the problems of Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan and political instability in Pakistan. But the rising tide of Islamism in long tranquil Bangladesh requires a fresh look. Should Bangladesh become a safe-haven for radical Islam, the impact upon the global war on terrorism in the region and elsewhere would be truly severe.

**Undoing Traditional Bangladesh**

With the 1947 partition of India, East Bengal, the province that is now Bangladesh, became East Pakistan, united in government but not in territory with West Pakistan. While post-partition India proceeded toward consolidating its democratic trajectory, the Pakistani experience was much more checkered. The initial vote of East Bengal Muslims for inclusion into Pakistan reflected the tremendous complexity of identity in South Asia, with local, national, as well as religious dimensions. But Pakistan’s claim to represent Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and a new Islamic nationalism backfired. West Pakistani, and specifically, Punjabi chauvinism highlighted the underlying diversity of South Asian Muslims, eventually serving to bolster local Bengali identity. This caused increasing friction within the troubled relationships between West Pakistan and the geographically smaller, but much more populous, East Pakistan. Hence, with the first substantive experimentation with democratic elections, the East Pakistan based Awami League won an outright majority in the national parliament, setting the stage for a political crisis that was resolved only by the war that led to the declaration of East Pakistan’s independence as Bangladesh in 1971.
While Islamism has long been a major factor in Pakistani politics, Bangladeshi Islam has traditionally not accepted radical Islamism’s view of the faith.\(^4\) Due to their country’s indigenous Sufi movements and the assimilation of Hindu and Buddhist attributes, most Bangladeshis have historically practiced a moderate and tolerant form of Islam. While 98 percent of Bangladesh’s population are Bengalis, of which more than five percent are Bengali Hindus, the remainder is largely non-Muslim tribal groups.\(^5\) These religious minorities, along with the territorial imprint of Indian culture, provide Bangladesh with a background of religious diversity and pluralism anathema to radical Islamism’s Manichean worldview.

After it gained independence in 1971, Bangladesh adopted in November 1972 a secular constitution that aimed to abolish religious communalism, political recognition of religion by the state, exploitation of religion for political purposes, and discrimination on religious grounds. While there have been Islam-oriented political parties in Bangladesh since independence, they have historically enjoyed only limited popular support, and have generally not advocated any program aimed at subverting the country’s secular constitutional order. However, under the military regimes of General Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and General H.M. Ershad (1982-1990), constitutional amendments gradually began to dilute the secular constitutional order, allowing Islamist parties to move closer to center stage in Bangladeshi political life.

Today, the long stalemate between the country’s two mainstream nationalist parties has enabled a small Islamist minority in parliament to amplify its voice as a coalition builder. Parties like Jamaat-e-Islami (The Islamic Party) and the Islamic Oikya Jote (Islamic Unity Front) have become indispensable for either major political party to seek or maintain a governing majority. Currently, the Islamist parties hold just 17 of the 300 parliamentary seats, but they have entered into a partnership with the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP) that has 180 seats. Since the BNP’s ability to maintain a majority depends on the support of the Islamist parties, coalition politics have greatly benefited the Islamists.

The BNP and other large nationalist parties may say their dealings with the Islamists are tactical, but their cooperation also helps to lend legitimacy to the Islamists, enabling these fringe parties to articulate more and more radical propositions in parliament. An atmosphere of intolerance is growing dominant: Political and social topics coated with faith are sanctified by the Islamist parties, and those who stand against the new discourse are dismissed as “anti-Muslim.”

Political stalemate has also led young Bangladeshis to turn to Islamism as an alternative. The feud between the country’s two major political parties,
the Bangladesh National Party and the Awami League, has fueled discontent. Islamists argue that both major parties use the parliament as a battleground to further individual and party interests rather than the national interest. The Islamists say they would be different. As he departed Bangladesh at the end of his posting, U.S. ambassador Harry K. Thomas warned that if the two main parties do not cooperate, public discontent will lead to search for alternative forces. Should the Awami League boycott the January 2007 parliamentary elections, the mantle of the opposition to the Bangladesh National Party will be worn by Islamists, who would thus secure the support of anti-ruling party interests and channel it towards their ideological agenda.

The traditional political class has largely failed to counter this disturbing trend and provide pragmatic political alternatives to Islamist rhetoric. Instead, the historically nationalist parties have begun to integrate Islamist discourse into their own political platforms. Mass demonstrations and party political posters have used religious phrases to lure the devout. At recent political rallies, supporters of the Bangladesh National Party, chanted *La ilaha illallah, dhaner shishe bismillah* (“There is no God by Allah, vote for the paddy-sheaf [symbol for the Bangladesh National Party], in the Name of God). In retort, members of the mainstream opposition Awami League, chanted *La ilha illallah, nuakar malik tui Allah* (“There is no God but Allah, the boat [symbol of the Awami League] belongs to Allah”).

**The Rise of Jamaat-e-Islami**

Political Islam in Bangladesh has always had some local promoters. The Islamist political parties, the most powerful of which is Jamaat-e-Islami, have used the tension between the Bengali and Islamic dimensions of Bangladeshi identity to further their objectives. The group, which remains an important political force in Pakistan, was formed before Bangladeshi independence. Its founder, Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, rejected nationalism, which he labeled *kufr* (unbelief) and had great interest in the political role of Islam. Maududi’s ideas went on to influence a whole generation of modern Islamists.

The Jamaat-e-Islami’s current leader in Bangladesh is Motiur Rahman Nizami, a man who fought against both Bengali nationalism and the secular constitutionalism that long characterized post-independence Bangladesh. When he assumed the leadership of the group in 2000, many veterans of the war of independence protested that he had fought alongside the Pakistani army in the *Razakar* militias created to oppose Bangladeshi independence. They demanded that Nizami be put on trial for war crimes. However, in March 2001, Nizami became Minister of Industries, where he was able to wield increasing power.
The party blends their integration of Muslim values and Islamic politics into a broader right-of-center reform platform to appeal to a wide swath of voters. For example, part of Jamaat-e-Islami’s popular support has been the result of its campaign to greatly enhance welfare programs for the poor in a country where per capita income is currently about US$300. Another issue that Islamists have successfully campaigned on is anti-corruption. Bangladesh is ranked the most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International. The government’s failure to deal with this problem has led to widespread popular frustration—even anger—with the mainstream nationalist political parties that can only serve to benefit the Islamists.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Jamaat-e-Islami seems to adhere to a political strategy similar to the one adopted by other radical Islamist groups in insecure democratic environments, such as Hizballah in Lebanon in the 1980s and the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in Algeria in the 1990s. Jamaat-e-Islami’s program consists of four components, the first of which is the adherence to a self-declared immutable understanding of Islam incorporating faith, politics, social mores, and economic practice. This declaration of intent to “uphold Islam in its entirety” is the cornerstone of the Jamaat-e-Islami’s strategy to lay the foundation for an authoritarian hierarchical structure with its own leadership at the helm.

The second component—a promise of compromise and accommodation with the established democratic order—appears to contradict the first. While the party is willing to enter into political alliances with non-Islamist partners to run for elections in a formal democratic framework, and to hold ministries and other official offices in a coalition government, it is naïve to interpret such pragmatism as an indication that Jamaat-e-Islami might moderate its underlying doctrinaire radical Islamist positions.

The third component is Jamaat-e-Islami’s network of social, educational, informational, and economic institutions, which, in effect, create a state within a state. Not only do these services extend Jamaat-e-Islami’s patronage network, but the party can also favorably juxtapose its institutions with the corruption and inefficiency of those of the Bangladeshi government. Impoverished citizens may not question how such services are financed, but the rapid growth of Jamaat-e-Islami’s network suggests that it has an outside revenue source which it has not revealed.

The final component of Jamaat-e-Islami’s program is the establishment of satellites and proxies. These are believed to include the terrorist group Jamatul Mujahidin, although Jamaat-e-Islami denies any connection to this militant group. In a replication of the relationship between the Arab Muslim Brotherhood and militant Islamist networks in the Middle East, Jamaat-e-
Islami serves as a recruitment channel for more radical organizations in Bangladesh: Several of the terrorists accused in August 17, 2005 bombings say they were once members of Jamaat-e-Islami. While Jamaat-e-Islami might say they seek accommodation with the democratic system, these offshoots reject any compromise with the democratic system.

The relationship between Jamaat-e-Islami and its subsidiaries is at times unclear. These groups appear to constitute an important means to consolidate Jamaat-e-Islami’s vision and plan, both by propagating ideas that the Jamaat-e-Islami abstains from openly voicing, and by pushing the center of gravity of the political debate toward radical Islamism, allowing Jamaat-e-Islami to position itself as a centrist party between fringe Islamism and corrupt secularism. The party can increasingly define itself through the Daily Sangram, one of Bangladesh’s largest circulation newspapers which it now controls. It also stages mass public protests that seem to greatly enhance support for Islamist agendas in parliament.

As a result of the Jamaat-e-Islami and other influences, a popular Islamist movement has emerged in recent years that, among other things, aims at forcibly eliminating support for Bangladesh’s secular and tolerant order. Their tactics include targeting secular intellectuals and journalists in addition to attacking symbols of secular authority. In one incident on February 24, 2004, assailants fatally stabbed Humayun Azad, a novelist who had spoken out against the abuse of women. Later, Omar Faruk, a leader of the Islamic Constitutional Movement, urged that the novelist not be buried in Bangladesh as he was “a self-proclaimed anti-Muslim author.”

**Foreign Factors**

Islamism in Bangladesh has not developed in isolation. Oil-rich Middle Eastern countries have funded both public and private Islamist initiatives, effectively exporting their brand of Salafist Islam to Bangladesh. The rising price of oil has translated into greater resources for Islamists, which have usually been channeled to Bangladesh through Islamic development organizations and banks like Al Arafah Islami Bank and Al Haramain Islamic Foundation. Currently, many Bangladeshi Islamists run financial institutions, schools, hospitals and industries backed by funding from abroad. Some politicians have started dressing in Arab-influenced attire, suggesting a conflation of Islamism with Arabism.

Abul Barakat, a Dhaka University economist who investigates Islamist financial networks, has concluded that the “economic basis of fundamentalism in Bangladesh is not weak.” Moreover, as Islamist politicians gain strength and confidence, they increasingly meddle in business. This interference, com-
combined with government corruption and lack of transparency, has chased away both Western and Far Eastern investors like the European Community and Japan, thereby ceding more of the playing field to Arab Gulf investors and people involved with Islamic financial institutions.\textsuperscript{17}

The Ministry of Social Welfare has oversight of the activities of non-government organizations, but Jamaat-e-Islami seized the portfolio through its participation in the ruling coalition. Its secretary-general, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, serves as minister and has the power to obstruct Western aid agencies while promoting Islamist ones.

Self-described apolitical Islamic movements like the Tablighi Jamaat, a prominent missionary group, have also encouraged the Islamization of politics in Bangladesh by seizing upon growing political, economic, and social discontent and radicalizing the disaffected.\textsuperscript{18} The movement has become particularly strong in Bangladesh. After the annual Hajj to Mecca, the world’s second largest Islamic pilgrimage takes place at Tongi, a town only two miles outside the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka, where up to four million Muslims travel for a three day \textit{Biswa Ijtema} or Islamic prayer meeting.\textsuperscript{19} Preachers and their congregation travel to the prayer meeting in large groups from different areas of the region to hear speeches from members of the Tablighi Jamaat delivered in Arabic, Urdu and Bengali. The Tablighi Jamaat encourages “Wahhabi brethren to go on missions with them” and share their knowledge with one another.\textsuperscript{20} This collaboration ensures a stream of support and income from wealthy Saudi Arabian sources.\textsuperscript{21} Tablighi Jamaat should be another serious concern for South Asian stability. In 1992, the group spawned a Bangladeshi branch of the Pakistan-based Harakat ul-Jihad Islami (Movement of Islamic Holy War), a Sunni extremist group involved in terrorism in Kashmir. Its leader, Fazlur Rahman, a powerful cleric from the port city of Chittagong, was one of the signatories of Osama Bin Laden’s 1998 declaration of “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders.” Harakat ul-Jihad Islami has since claimed responsibility for the August 21, 2004 assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina Wazed, leader of the opposition and Bangladesh’s second female prime minister. Government officials, embarrassed that political violence in Bangladesh made news abroad, argued that Harakat ul-Jihad Islami did not exist and that claims of its existence were fictitious. This assertion was undercut by death threats sent two weeks later by the group to prominent Awami League activists.\textsuperscript{22} Also, the Indian government believes Harakat ul-Jihad Islami to be responsible for attacks on the American Center in Calcutta in January 2002.

The ample funding enjoyed by Jamaat-e-Islami, Tablighi Jamaat and Harakat ul-Jihad Islami also seems aimed at encouraging Islamist intolerance
toward non-Muslims, sectarian minorities, and moderate Muslims. For example, Tablighi Jamaat has actively worked to rid local Islamic practice of perceived “Hindu influence.” While the Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Unity Council have accused the government of ethnic cleansing, Hindu Bangladeshis have reported claims of discrimination, harassment, property confiscation, torture, and gang-rape. During the present administration, between the years of 2001 to 2005, there has been a ten percent decrease in government recruitment of Hindus to the Bangladeshi civil service, opening up more jobs for Islamists. The growing radicalism in the region has contributed to the flight of minorities and dramatic demographic shifts. 

For example, at Bangladesh’s founding, about ten percent of its population was Hindu. Over the years, however, as many as 25 million Hindu Bangladeshis have crossed the border into India, bringing the Hindu share of the population down to five percent of the total. Between May and October 2002 alone, an estimated 20,000 people fled across the border.

Radical Islamists have also targeted the Ahmadiyya community, a Muslim reformist and revivalist movement founded in Qadyan, India in the nineteenth century. The Ahmadiyya’s millenarian interpretation of Islamic texts has placed them outside of the confines of Islamic orthodoxy. Since 2004, the government has sought to ban Ahmadiyya publications and prohibit Ahmadi children from attending schools. The Bangladesh Khilafat Andolen (Caliphate Movement) and Islami Shasantastra Andolen (Islamic System Movement), two extremist Islamist organizations, have joined the Jamaat-e-Islami in demanding that the government declare the Ahmadiyyas “infidels.”

Human Rights Watch has warned of “an unprecedented climate of fear [which] now pervades Bangladesh’s minority.”

In addition to minority flight, there have been other factors augmenting the relative power of the Islamists. Since 1991, perhaps as many as 300,000 Rohingya Muslims have entered Bangladesh across its southeastern border with Myanmar (Burma), a Jamaat-e-Islami stronghold. Many reside between the port city of Cox’s Bazaar and the Myanmar border. Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, the Islami Chatra League, have worked to radicalize these refugees, who are probably more susceptible to religious indoctrination after their persecution in Myanmar. Indeed, according to reports by human rights groups on local minorities, many of Harakat ul-Jihad Islami’s newest members are recruited from the Rohingya settlements. The influx of small-arms and weapons entering Bangladesh’s main port of Chittagong underlines the danger not only to Bangladeshi security, but also to regional countries and the global war on terrorism. Islamist groups threaten to transform Chit-
tagong into a new Karachi, the Pakistani city which has become largely a no-go area for Westerners, especially after the February 2002 murder there of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl.

What Leverage Does Washington Have?

The rise of Islamism and radical Islam in Bangladesh are extremely worrisome trends, but this does not mean that the country need fall to radical Islam. However, it will not be able to contain the growing threat of militant Islamism on its own. Clearly, international efforts to crack down on transnational Islamist and terrorist funding networks and groups like the Tablighi Jamaat will be vital. But Bangladesh also needs encouragement and assistance in addressing the internal vulnerabilities such as corruption and economic underdevelopment that radical Islamists have begun to exploit.

In thinking about how to stem the rising tide of Islamism in Bangladesh, it is important to remember that the driving force behind Islamism’s spread is not only financial support from Saudi Arabia and other oil-wealthy Arab states, but also the international flows of migrant workers, the invisible foot soldiers of globalization. For example, according to the Migration Policy Institute, Saudi Arabia has been one of the largest importers of Bangladeshi laborers, but many Bangladeshi workers have been rendered jobless by Riyadh’s desire to “Saudi-ize” their workforce. They return to Bangladesh imbued with Salafist intolerance; unemployed and with few future prospects, they are ready to promote intransigent interpretations of Islam at odds with traditional, moderate Bengali practices.

One relatively straightforward area where the U.S. might usefully intervene to bolster Bangladesh’s economy is in international trade policy. The 1974 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade enacted the Multi-Fibers Act, a series of negotiated quota restrictions on trade in textiles and clothing between individual first-world importers and developing country exporters. This quota regime enabled Bangladesh to gradually expand its export of apparels from US$620 million in 1990 to US$5.7 billion in 2004. But, unfortunately, the Multi-Fibers Act expired in January 2005. The subsequent phase-out may lead to a total collapse of an important and labor-intensive Bangladeshi industry. That could lead to more jobless Bangladeshi workers, who will either seek out work abroad—most likely in the Middle East—or perhaps become easy recruits to the increasingly potent “Islamist alternative” in Bangladesh.

Should Bangladesh fail as a state, trends on the ground indicate that it will likely become increasingly Islamized. Bangladesh cannot contain the threat
of militant Islamism alone. Its government is locked into a cycle of accommodating both Islamist political parties and illicit Islamist networks. The implications of an Islamized Bangladesh for regional security and for the global struggle against radical Islam would be truly profound. The Western world, especially the United States, must not ignore this deteriorating situation.

Notes

1 Bangladesh Islami Ain Bostobaiyner Ahobban ("Bangladesh: A Call for Implementation of Islamic Law") Jamaatul Mujahideen pamphlet distributed in conjunction with the August 17, 2005 bombings.

2 A 2005 editorial in the Los Angeles Times summed up the situation thus: “Bangladesh, which has only just admitted to the terrorists in its midst, has a long way to go to ensure its own security and avoid sowing more discord in a volatile region... According to Bangladesh’s national police chief, the latest bombings were the country’s first suicide attacks, and they used explosives more powerful than those used in most previous attacks. This suggests that militants in Bangladesh are adopting the tactics and technology of their counterparts in the Middle East—and could be interested in stronger ties with groups abroad...What makes the situation more precarious is that Bangladesh only just admitted that violent extremists were a problem. Since 2001, Western intelligence agencies have reported the presence in Bangladesh of Taliban remnants along with various other militant groups. It was not until February 2005, however, that Bangladesh addressed the issue at the behest of the international community, banning two terrorist groups and putting some of their ranks in prison. ‘Dangerous Ties’, Los Angeles Times editorial, December 7, 2005


12 “Militants Claim Jamaat Background.” Daily Star, Aug. 25, 2005

13 The Committee to Protect Journalists has labeled Bangladesh “the most dangerous place” for


21 Ibid, 3.


24 Conversation with Debapriya Bhattacharya, Director of Center for Policy Dialogue, local civil society think tank, Washington DC February 2005.


26 Ibid.


30 Refugee International. http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/country/detail/2944/


