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The Persistent Challenge of Extremism in Bangladesh

By Mubashar Hasan and Geoffrey Macdonald



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina speaks with family members at a memorial service on July 4, 2016, for victims of the Holey Artisan attack three days before. (Photo by AP)

Contents

Introduction	3
Islam, Politics, and Extremism in Bangladesh, 1971–2016	5
State and International Responses to the Holey Artisan Attack	7
Extremism since the Holey Artisan Attack	8
Drivers of Contemporary Extremism	12
Conclusion and Recommendations	17

Summary

- Although contemporary narratives of Bangladesh often emphasize its secular founding, Islamist politics and religious violence have a long history that predates its independence.
- Since the Holey Artisan café terrorist attack in July 2016, measurable indicators of terrorist attacks and related fatalities have recorded a steady decline. However, extremism continues to manifest itself in attacks on and harassment of non-Muslim religious minorities, Muslim minority sects, gender and sexual minorities, atheists, and critics of Islamism. In addition, violent extremist organizations continue to recruit and to carry out attacks.
- Contemporary extremism is rooted in historical dynamics of state and national identity formation that have inflamed tensions between secular elites and citizens, on one side, and Islamist social and political movements and religious conservatives, on the other. These issues are exacerbated by narrowing political space for dissent, radicalization of some migrant workers, contentious regional politics, and the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Bangladeshi state, nongovernmental organizations, and foreign governments must work to promote social and political pluralism and tolerance; monitor, arrest, and imprison violent extremists in accordance with the rule of law; and increase interreligious dialogue across the region.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the contemporary dynamics, drivers, and manifestations of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh. Commissioned by the South Asia Program at the United States Institute of Peace, it is based on desk research and interviews conducted by the authors in the winter of 2021.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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Supporters of the Islamist group Hefazat-i-Islam participate in a protest rally demanding the removal of the Lady Justice statue—which they claimed was a form of idol worship—from the Supreme Court complex in Dhaka on February 24, 2017. (Photo by A. M. Ahad/AP)

Introduction

In July 2016, five young Bangladeshi militants stormed into Holey Artisan, an upscale café in the diplomatic zone of Bangladesh’s capital city, Dhaka. Armed with guns and machetes, the militants began murdering patrons, targeting mostly foreigners and non-Muslims. After a 12-hour hostage situation, Bangladeshi police retook the café. Twenty hostages, including nine Italians, seven Japanese, a US citizen, and an Indian, were killed, along with two police officers and all five militants.¹ The terrorist attack sent shock waves across Bangladesh, South Asia, and the world. Bangladesh had been widely considered a stronghold of religious pluralism and cultural and political secularism in the Muslim world, but the Holey Artisan attack illuminated a long-standing strand of illiberal and extreme religious ideology that had metastasized into violent extremism.

Bangladesh’s complicated political, cultural, and religious identity is rooted in its history. Until 1971, Bangladesh was part of Pakistan, which had been divided between eastern and western wings during the partition of colonial India in 1947. By 1971, East Pakistan was home to the majority of Pakistan’s population. East Pakistan’s population—which was predominantly Bengali—was ethnically and linguistically distinct from their conationalists in West Pakistan. Although Bengali Muslims supported the Islamic nationalist movement that birthed Pakistan, Bengali cultural pride and the East’s large Hindu minority cultivated a uniquely syncretic and pluralistic political and social milieu.

When East Pakistan’s Awami League won the majority of seats in the parliamentary elections of 1970, West Pakistan’s ruling elite refused to turn over power. The resulting political



MAP 1. MAP OF BANGLADESH

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

stalemate led to the East's declaration of independence in March 1971. During the nine-month war that followed, Bengali nationalists—with humanitarian, diplomatic, and military support from India—won Bangladesh's independence. During the war, a small section of the East's population joined with Pakistan's invading army and committed significant atrocities against East Pakistanis to put down the insurrection. Although the victorious Bangladeshi government, led by self-proclaimed secular and socialist politicians, deliberately contrasted itself with Pakistan's Muslim state, Bangladesh's Muslim population remained deeply religious, and many were still committed to Islamically oriented governance.² For the last 50 years, Bangladesh's political elites have engaged in a bifurcated and partly contradictory strategy of suppressing militant extremists who seek to upend Bangladesh's secular principles while embracing Islamic symbolism, rhetoric, and laws to placate the conservatism of ordinary Bangladeshis and powerful Islamist movements.

The Holey Artisan attack was a violent expression of this historical tension. Following the attack, the Bangladeshi government began a concerted and controversial counterterrorism campaign to prevent another terrorist incident.³ In addition, international donors poured money into initiatives to prevent and counter radicalization to violence. Since 2016, the number of

terrorist incidents and related deaths have been in steady decline, and international attention to extremism in Bangladesh has waned. But the problem of extremism remains. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) continue to recruit in Bangladesh, small-scale terrorist attacks persist, and localized low-intensity violence against non-Muslim religious minorities, gender and sexual minorities, atheists, and other religious nonconformists persists.

This report examines religious extremism in Bangladesh along a spectrum defined by the level of militancy. On one end is religiously inspired illiberalism—including intolerant and often violent attitudes toward religious, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities—that typically does not inspire violent action unless provoked by a specific incident or elite manipulation. On the other end of the spectrum are organized VEOs—such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—that advocate and employ violence in support of an Islamic political and social agenda. In the middle are organized Islamist groups that promote a strict form of Islamic governance but typically do not openly support violence. All the groups along this spectrum share an illiberal and exclusionary interpretation of Islam but have differing degrees of ideological coherence and willingness to use violence.

Although religious extremism is not unique to any one religion, this report focuses on Islamist extremism because it is the primary form of extremism in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. The term “radicalization” is used in the report to mean movement along the spectrum toward violence. While violence has become a common part of Bangladesh’s political culture, Islamist violence is distinct in its goal: Bangladesh’s political parties use violence to capture the state, whereas militant Islamists use violence to transform it toward Islamic governance.

The report begins with a discussion of the evolution of Islam, politics, and extremism in Bangladesh. It then presents a brief overview of state and international efforts to counter extremism, followed by a discussion of contemporary forms of extremism in Bangladesh and their key drivers. The report concludes with policy recommendations for governmental and international stakeholders to better forestall and counter extremism in Bangladesh.

Islam, Politics, and Extremism in Bangladesh, 1971–2016

Bangladesh’s first constitution, adopted in 1972, the year after the war for independence, laid down the de jure foundation for nonreligious governance. Secularism was declared one of the fundamental principles of the state, and the use of religion for political ends was prohibited. Under Mujibur Rahman (known as Sheikh Mujib), who served first as president and later as prime minister from 1971 to 1975, the government began secularizing school textbooks, renaming buildings and streets after national figures, and restricting public recitation of the Quran. Yet by 1974—amid economic decline, famine, and a restive Islamist movement at the local level—Sheikh Mujib began to include Islamic culture and values in public life to retain public support, including establishing new religious national holidays, banning alcohol and gambling, supporting Islamic education and practice, and reinstating Quranic recitation on public radio and television.⁴

Sheikh Mujib’s assassination in 1975 ushered in 15 years of autocratic rule that featured the growing Islamization of the state. The government of President Ziaur Rahman (1976–1981) took several steps to embed Islam in the rules and norms of government and politics. The Zia government removed the term “secularism” from the constitution and unbanned Islamic parties that had fought against independence, including Jamaat-i-Islami (discussed later in the report). In their public statements and use of political symbolism, President Zia, who founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) during his tenure, and his allies emphasized the Muslim character of Bangladeshi society and the state. After Zia’s assassination in 1981, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad consolidated power and continued the progressive Islamization of Bangladeshi politics. In 1988, Ershad declared Islam the state religion of Bangladesh.

A democratic movement ousted Ershad in 1990, beginning the contemporary period of electoral competition in Bangladesh. Over the next 30 years, Bangladesh’s political leaders would embrace both secular and Islamic values. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League—who is currently serving her third consecutive term as prime minister—restored the term “secularism” in the constitution in 2011 (while retaining Islam as the state religion) and has publicly affirmed Bangladesh’s secular identity on multiple occasions. As a political party, the Awami League is generally associated with secular nationalism and left-leaning economic policy. Nevertheless, both the Awami League and the BNP have wielded Islam for political advantage, including using religious rhetoric in political speeches, platforms, and campaigns; publicly showcasing their senior leaders performing Islamic rituals; forming alliances with Islamist parties; promoting Muslim solidarity in foreign policy (for example, emphasizing trade in “halal” goods and services); and consistently increasing state investment in Islamic cultural and religious centers and activities.

The increasing prominence of Islam in Bangladesh’s politics has responded to a strong current of public sentiment for Islamically informed governance. Survey data in Bangladesh show high levels of support for democratic institutions as well as for the dictates of sharia. In a 2017 survey commissioned by the RESOLVE Network, a large majority of Bangladeshis supported property rights, free political expression, judicial independence, and free elections.⁵ Yet even larger majorities advocated for a greater role for sharia, including the imposition of harsh physical punishments for criminality and forced veiling. Nearly 80 percent of those surveyed said sharia should have a “somewhat” or “much larger” role in the legal system. The data show a widely held belief that sharia will ensure better governance outcomes, such as fairer justice and less corruption. These results match earlier survey data. A 2013 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 82 percent of Bangladeshis favored making sharia the official law, and a significant minority, 44 percent, supported executing apostates.⁶ In a 2006 Gallup poll, 91 percent of Bangladeshis said they wanted sharia as the only (or at least as one) source of legislation.⁷ Evidently, Bangladesh is affected by the growing popular demand across the Muslim world for a greater reflection of Islamic values and sharia in governing institutions.

Alongside the expanding role of religion in mainstream Bangladeshi society and politics, violent extremism has sprouted and grown. Scholar Ali Riaz has identified five “generations” of Bangladeshi violent extremists whose vision of an Islamic state has evolved from outside to inside Bangladesh.⁸ The first generation of violent extremists were a product of the war in Afghanistan to drive out Soviet troops and overthrow the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

In a 2017 survey . . . a large majority of Bangladeshis supported property rights, free political expression, judicial independence, and free elections. Yet even larger majorities advocated for a greater role for sharia.

From 1979 to 1990, several thousand Bangladeshis joined the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. When these fighters returned to Bangladesh, they formed a VEO known as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). This second generation marked a shift of Bangladeshi violent extremism toward domestic objectives, specifically, the creation of an Islamic state in Bangladesh. JMB and affil-

iated groups and individuals were responsible for bombings, suicide attacks, and intimidation. In the early 2000s, the third generation of Bangladeshi violent extremists became more urban, middle class, and sophisticated. New VEOs, such as the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which is also called Ansar al-Islam (AAI) form the fourth generation. These groups use the internet extensively in their efforts to recruit new members and spread their beliefs, and they were linked to killings of secular bloggers and LGBTQ activists in Dhaka in the early 2010s.⁹

The fifth and current generation of violent extremists emerged in 2015 and is associated with domestic and transnational goals. Groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) recruit Bangladeshis to use violence to create a global caliphate as well as an Islamic state in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi militants from this generation—claiming allegiance to ISIS—carried out the Holey Artisan attack in July 2016.

State and International Responses to the Holey Artisan Attack

Bangladesh institutionalized its counterterrorism approach in the early 2000s in response to the rising challenge of Islamist militancy.¹⁰ In 2009, the newly elected Awami League government formed the National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention, which brought together various ministries and security agencies to coordinate the country's policies on counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).¹¹ The same year, the government also formed the National Committee for Intelligence Coordination, chaired by the prime minister, to coordinate intelligence gathering and operations with security agencies. In February 2016, a special counterterrorism unit was formed in the Dhaka police force called the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTCU), which was tasked with studying, monitoring, and thwarting violent extremism, among other activities. The CTTCU was supplemented by a state paramilitary security force, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which had been formed in 2004 to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and other threats.

In the year after the Holey Artisan attack, Bangladesh bolstered its counterterrorism approach. The CTTCU received international training and equipment and its budget rapidly expanded. The Bangladeshi government updated its criminal codes on terrorism, created a special tribunal for counterterrorism, improved monitoring of Bangladeshi extremists who traveled abroad, and began cooperation with INTERPOL to track international terrorist suspects.¹² However, Bangladesh's counterterrorism campaign has been controversial. Police and RAB units have

been accused with growing frequency of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture during counterterrorism and other operations.¹³ In December 2021, the United States sanctioned the RAB and seven current or former RAB officials for human rights violations.

In addition to adopting these intelligence and law enforcement approaches, Bangladesh has enlisted several ministries—including the ministries of religious affairs, information, culture, education, home affairs, and youth—in an effort to implement P/CVE programs. The government’s P/CVE efforts have included recruiting imams and religious scholars to raise public awareness on terrorism and run deradicalization programs with apprehended militants; developing online and print-based P/CVE messaging campaigns; collaborating with universities to identify at-risk students; engaging youth in cultural and sports activities; revising madrassa curricula; monitoring online extremist rhetoric and recruitment; and funding local think tanks to study extremism and develop evidence-based P/CVE programs.¹⁴ Although generally conducted in accordance with international standards for P/CVE interventions, these programs have been criticized as ad hoc and not systematically evaluated.¹⁵

International donors have also implemented P/CVE programs in Bangladesh since the Holey Artisan attack. Since 2016, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund has supported raising awareness, training in vocational skills, youth clubs, and other activities designed to counter radicalization to violence.¹⁶ In addition, Western governments, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the United Nations have funded and implemented P/CVE programs designed to research the drivers of violent extremism among youth, women, and other vulnerable groups; to empower government officials to develop CVE strategies; to counter violent extremist messaging online; to amplify nonviolent interpretations of Islam; to foster inter-religious dialogue; to promote diversity, inclusion, and tolerance; and to provide young people with skills training and employment opportunities.

Extremism since the Holey Artisan Attack

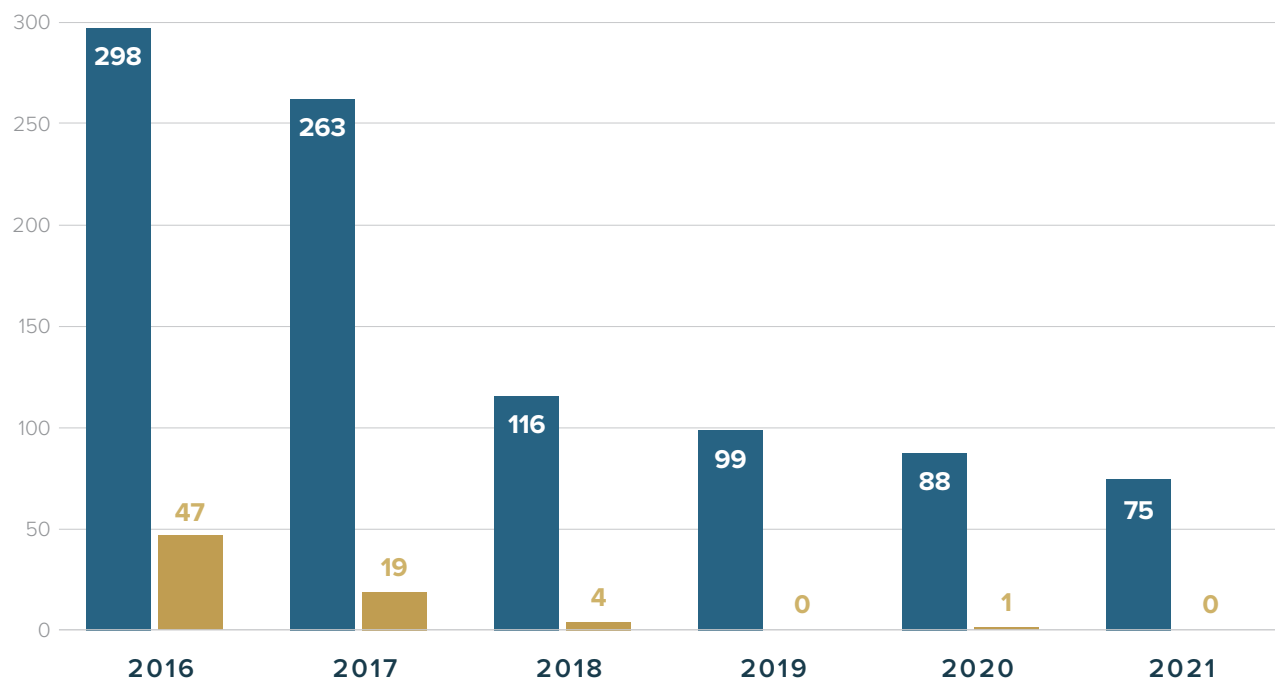
According to data compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, the number of terrorist incidents and related fatalities (among civilians and security force personnel) have declined consistently since 2016.¹⁷ (See figure 1.) This suggests that domestic and international counterterrorism and P/CVE programs may have enjoyed some success. However, several VEOs continue to operate in Bangladesh with differing ideological and geographical scopes and operational capabilities.

The primary transnational VEO operating in Bangladesh is ISIS, which seeks a multiregional caliphate united around a strict interpretation of Islam. ISIS has reportedly named an “emir in ‘Bengal’” and has released propaganda in Bengali.¹⁸ A content analysis of ISIS’s online magazine and other documents published in 2019 found that ISIS recruitment rhetoric draws on several political and social themes, including allegations that the Bangladeshi government is oppressive and has arrogated God’s power; that the main conservative opposition parties are insufficiently Muslim; and that “crusaders,” Westerners, and non-Muslims are undermining

FIGURE 1.

Terrorist incidents and fatalities in Bangladesh, 2016–2021

■ Incidents of Terrorism ■ Fatalities from Terrorism



Source: “Datasheet—Bangladesh,” South Asia Terrorism Portal, accessed June 16, 2022, www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/incidents-data/bangladesh. Fatality totals reflect civilian and security force personnel deaths.

Islam. The solution to these problems, according to this ISIS material, is a global caliphate and an Islamic state in Bangladesh, the creation of which can be pursued with violent jihad conducted in accordance with the Quran.¹⁹

ISIS has claimed a role in coordinating several relatively recent attacks in Bangladesh. In 2019, ISIS took credit for six attacks, chiefly targeting police officers, using improvised explosive devices.²⁰ The same year, seven men were sentenced to death for the ISIS-inspired Holey Artisan attack. One of those convicted wore an ISIS cap while departing the courthouse.²¹ Despite this, the government, seeking to downplay the violent extremist threat, continues to deny that Bangladesh-based terrorists have any connections to ISIS or other transnational terror groups.

The primary regional VEO operating in Bangladesh is AQIS, which seeks to create an Islamic state that stretches across South Asia from Afghanistan to Myanmar. AQIS claimed credit for the murder of several secular bloggers in the mid-2010s.²² A 2019 study of AQIS recruitment rhetoric found that the organization targets Bangladeshi university students from the middle and upper-middle classes with four key messages: India exerts a pernicious secular and Hindu influence, Muslims are being persecuted globally, women lack the religious credentials to be appropriate leaders, and Bangladesh suffers from insufficient legislative and social religiosity.²³

Recent violence continues a decades-old pattern of hostility toward minorities in Bangladesh that is often linked to electoral politics, religious chauvinism, and cross-border tension with Hindu-majority India and Buddhist-majority Myanmar.

There are several small domestic VEOs, the most prominent of which are Neo-JMB and ABT/AAI.²⁴ Several of these groups have affiliations with regional and transnational VEOs. ABT/AAI is considered an affiliate of AQIS, while Neo-JMB, an offshoot of the defunct JMB organization, is associated with ISIS.²⁵ Since 2016, police arrested nearly 2,700 Bangladeshi Islamist militants affiliated with these groups.²⁶

Studies of radicalization to violent extremism in the lead-up to and since the Holey Artisan attack suggest a socioeconomic mix gravitates toward VEOs and extremist ideologies. Although low-income and low-education (often religiously educated) individuals are among those radicalized, several of the Holey Artisan attackers were wealthy and highly educated.²⁷ As in other countries, radicalization does not have only one profile. A study of 112 extremists arrested in 2014 and 2015 found that most were young (only five were over the age of 40), male (only two were women), and from middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds; and most had high levels of education.²⁸ An updated study with an expanded (though still incomplete) dataset in 2018 came to a similar conclusion: “Most of the Bangladeshi militants are young, educated males increasingly coming from well-off families.”²⁹ Gender dynamics might be shifting: in one national survey conducted in 2017, women outnumbered men among the small number of respondents (approximately 5 percent) who supported the goals and tactics of VEOs.³⁰ Another 2017 study found that a growing number of women were being arrested or killed in counterterrorism operations.³¹

HARASSMENT OF AND ATTACKS ON NON-MUSLIMS

Multiple Bangladeshi human rights organizations have documented a pattern of targeted violence against non-Muslim minorities, specifically Hindus and Buddhists.³² For instance, the NGO Ain o Salish Kendra reported 67 attacks on Hindu and Buddhist temples or idols and over a dozen attacks on Hindu homes and businesses in 2020.³³ The Bangladesh Peace Observatory documented 57 incidents of “religious sectarianism” in 2021.³⁴ From 2016 to 2021, Odhikar cited 585 incidents of “repression” against religious minorities, including murder, assault, abduction, rape, land confiscation, and temple desecration.³⁵

This recent violence continues a decades-old pattern of hostility toward minorities in Bangladesh that is often linked to electoral politics, religious chauvinism, and cross-border tension with Hindu-majority India and Buddhist-majority Myanmar.³⁶ In addition, property disputes are an important dimension of violence against Hindus. These disputes originate in the 1965 Enemy Property Ordinance, which allowed the then-Pakistan government to seize and redistribute land owned by Hindus. Despite the law’s repeal in 2001, little progress has been made in returning stolen land; and territorial confiscations, which often result in violent clashes, continue.³⁷ Activists for minority groups claim that property theft—organized by local residents—is often a key component of contemporary anti-minority violence, even when the spark is ostensibly interreligious tension. After recent anti-Hindu attacks, the general secretary of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian Unity Council in Bangladesh told the BBC that “there is an orchestrated attempt to grab Hindu houses and lands in Bangladesh, and [people] are being forced to leave the country.”

In addition to domestic and regional dynamics, the internet has created a new dimension of communal violence that showcases growing extremism at the local level. Starting in the early 2010s and escalating in number and severity in recent years, social media–inspired violence has become a key aspect of minority vulnerability, and this type of violence is likely to grow as more Bangladeshis go online.³⁸

Over the last decade, several incidents illuminate this phenomenon. The first major Facebook-inspired attack occurred in 2012 in Cox’s Bazar in Chattogram Division in the southeast. Rumors of a picture of a burned Quran posted to the Facebook profile of a Buddhist youth prompted protests, processions, and ultimately violence. A group of Muslims gathered at the young man’s village, demanding his arrest. The gathering spiraled into riots. A reported 25,000 Muslims destroyed at least 12 temples and looted or destroyed 50 homes across multiple Buddhist villages.³⁹ Although the violence appeared organic, it was planned and coordinated by pro-Islamist youths and utilized by political elites across the political spectrum. An investigation showed that a screenshot of the young man’s Facebook page had been altered so that it appeared he was tagged in the image of the burning Quran.⁴⁰

In the years since, multiple anti-minority riots followed this pattern. In 2014, a group of approximately 3,000 Muslims—led by teachers and students from several madrassas—attacked a Hindu village in Comilla in Chattogram Division, destroying temples and vandalizing the homes of at least 38 families.⁴¹ In 2016, a large group of Muslim rioters attacked a nearby Hindu community in Brahmanbaria in Chattogram Division, vandalizing around 100 homes and at least five temples, stealing valuables, and assaulting Hindu residents.⁴² In 2019, a mob gathered in Bhola in Barisal Division to apprehend and lynch a Hindu man accused of insulting Islam. Four people died in the chaos as police violently dispersed the crowd.⁴³ In each case, the offending content had been posted on Facebook. Afterward, the alleged blasphemy was shown to be fake or the accused Hindu perpetrator claimed with evidence that his account had been hacked.

In October 2021, the largest spasm of anti-Hindu violence in several years rocked Bangladesh. Across the country, Muslim mobs attacked Hindu temples and homes over several days, killing at least two people.⁴⁴ Two Facebook posts drove the violence. A video of a Quran placed on the knee of a Hindu deity circulated widely on Facebook. In a second post, a Hindu man allegedly defamed Islam. Following the violence, police arrested a Muslim man who had placed the Quran at the Hindu temple. Earlier in the year, supporters of the Islamist advocacy movement Hefazat-i-Islam (discussed below) destroyed 80 Hindu homes after a Hindu man criticized the group on Facebook.⁴⁵

HATE SPEECH AND VIOLENCE TOWARD SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES

Members of sexual and gender minorities have been high-profile targets of religious extremism. The number of murders of LGBTQ activists has declined since 2016, when several prominent gay rights activists were killed. However, this is likely due to self-censorship among LGBTQ activists, who rarely speak or write publicly amid increasing insecurity.⁴⁶ Recent research shows that the LGBTQ community routinely faces violence, harassment, and social ostracism. A 2021 report from the International Republican Institute found that LGBTQ people in Bangladesh experience violence and ostracism in their families; sexual violence from strangers and police; and discrimination in housing, jobs,

medical care, and other areas.⁴⁷ Participants in this study said religious beliefs feed the violence and intolerance. “In the context of Bangladesh, people are blindfolded by Islamic thoughts,” said an LGBTQ person.⁴⁸ These findings match earlier studies from 2015.⁴⁹ Recent studies also show an increasing online dimension to LGBTQ hate speech and harassment. Researchers at the International Republican Institute found that hate speech targeting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people was not only vitriolic, but also often cited Islam to justify violence, harassment, and demeaning rhetoric.⁵⁰ Many LGBTQ activists say they now feel acutely insecure and live in constant anxiety.⁵¹

VIOLENCE AGAINST ATHEISTS, MUSLIM MINORITY SECTS, AND CRITICS OF ISLAMISM

Atheists, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Sufi Muslims, and Muslims with heterodox religious views often come under verbal and physical attack from extremists and VEOs. Several recent incidents illuminate this trend. In 2018, a left-wing publisher known for critical commentary on Islam was shot dead.⁵² In 2019, a blogger fled to India after facing death threats from VEOs for criticizing anti-minority violence and Islamists.⁵³ In 2019, a hard-line cleric called for Ahmadiyya Muslims to be declared “non-Muslim.”⁵⁴ In 2020, Islamists vandalized Hindu homes after a Hindu man praised French President Emmanuel Macron on Facebook for his policies against extremism.⁵⁵ Bangladeshi academics, civil society leaders, writers, and ordinary citizens routinely express nervousness about proclaiming their atheism or publicly criticizing Islam and Islamist groups.⁵⁶

Drivers of Contemporary Extremism

A mixture of new and long-standing social and political dynamics are driving this current of extremist ideology and violence: the influence of legal but illiberal Islamist movements, the narrowing of democratic political space, regional politics, migration, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIST SOCIOPOLITICAL MOVEMENTS

Bangladesh’s persistent extremism is both fed by and feeds hard-line Islamist groups that stoke domestic illiberalism through their political rhetoric and mobilization. Two Islamist groups, Hefazat-i-Islam and Jamaat-i-Islami (commonly referred to as Hefazat and Jamaat), are emblematic of this type of organized Islamism that can indirectly create the ideological conditions for radicalization to violence. Although Hefazat and Jamaat publicly reject violence, VEOs utilize their illiberal worldviews for recruiting and organizing.

Islamist politics have a symbiotic relationship with Bangladesh’s madrasa education system. Two types of madrassas exist in Bangladesh: Alia (“noble”) madrassas, which are government regulated, and Qawmi (“public”) madrassas, which are privately run and outside government oversight. Recent studies estimate that there are over 9,300 Alia madrassas educating more than 2 million children and nearly 15,000 Qawmi madrassas with nearly 1.85 million students.⁵⁷ Alia madrassas include mandated nonreligious content, such as science and mathematics, but both types of madrassas feature illiberal religious curricula that emphasize rigidly conservative interpretations of Muslim history, morality, and jurisprudence. Both Jamaat and Hefazat draw many members and substantial support from these religious educational institutions.

Bangladeshis hold candles and sing songs at a vigil on July 3, 2016, for victims of the Holey Artisan Bakery terrorist attack in Dhaka. (Photo by AP)

Jamaat is an Islamist political party and social service organization. Although the government banned its political activities in 2013, Jamaat has continued to run charities that provide religious, social, food, and medical services at the local level. Jamaat espouses an anti-secular political philosophy that advocates an Islamic government in Bangladesh. In Jamaat's party documents, Islam is described as both a religion and "the only



complete and balanced code of life and a systematic and comprehensive ideology and above all a revolutionary socio-political movement.”⁵⁸ Jamaat's platform is based on the ideology of Mawlana Maududi, who founded the Jamaat movement in South Asia before the partition of India and Pakistan. Maududi promoted militancy in pursuit of Islamic governance: “Prayer, fasting . . . provide preparation and training for the assumption of just power. Just as governments train their armies [and] police forces . . . before employing them to do their job, so does Islam. . . . [Islam] first trains all those who volunteer for the services to God before allowing them to undertake jihad and install God's rule on earth.”⁵⁹

Although Jamaat's foundational ideology rejects secular governance, the party has actively engaged in politics. In 1971, Jamaat's activists joined the Pakistani military in committing atrocities against Bengali civilians, intellectuals, and liberation fighters. The postindependence government of Sheikh Mujib banned Jamaat, but after his assassination, the Zia government permitted Jamaat to resume political activities. In the post-1990 democratic era, Jamaat has formed alliances with both major political parties. In 1996, Jamaat joined forces with the then opposition Awami League against the Bangladesh Nationalist Party; but in 2001, Jamaat switched sides and aligned with the BNP, joining its government in 2006. The BNP and Jamaat maintain an informal alliance today.

When the Awami League returned to power in 2009, it moved against Jamaat. In 2011, the Awami League convened a tribunal to investigate war crimes committed during the independence war. Several Jamaat leaders have been sentenced to death or to life in prison by the tribunal, which has faced widespread criticism from international human rights organizations.⁶⁰ In 2013, Awami League allies successfully brought a court case that deregistered Jamaat as a political party because of its religious character. Nevertheless, through its social welfare activities and informal political organizing, Jamaat retains significant support around Bangladesh, and its political ideology remains potent.

As is the case with Jamaat, support for Hefazat's highly conservative social vision is buttressed by the charity work of its madrassas, which house orphans, hold religious services for the poor, and provide financial relief to poor families.

Hefazat is an Islamist advocacy movement comprised of madrassa teachers and students. Although Hefazat declares it has no electoral ambition, its demands constitute a clear political vision that has become increasingly powerful in politics.⁶¹ In 2013, Hefazat released a list of 13 demands, including reinstating Islamic phrasing into the constitution; implementing capital punishment for blasphemy; making Islamic education mandatory; ending foreign cul-

tural practices such as the mixing of genders in public spaces; and preventing the construction of idolatrous sculptures in public spaces.⁶² As is the case with Jamaat, support for Hefazat's highly conservative social vision is buttressed by the charity work of its madrassas, which house orphans, hold religious services for the poor, and provide financial relief to poor families.

While Hefazat has eschewed militancy, its ideology appears to have inspired violence and harassment. After its demands were released, the jihadist group ABT/AAI parroted them and went on to murder numerous secular writers, publishers, Sufis, and non-Muslims. Although Hefazat's public activities date only to 2010, the Qawmi madrassa movement, which is the foundation of Hefazat's membership, has a long history of anti-liberal positions and actions. In 1974, Qawmi madrassa students led protests over writer Daud Haider's "blasphemous" poetry that drove him to flee the country. In the 1990s, a similar protest movement forced writer Taslima Nasreen to leave after she wrote a novel portraying Muslim violence against Hindus in Bangladesh. In 2010, Hefazat was formed to protest equalizing inheritance laws for men and women. Research by journalists and academics has revealed that Qawmi madrassa leaders and students have had links to terrorism.⁶³

Even while repressing Jamaat's activists and political activities, the Awami League—conscious of Hefazat's growing power—has courted Hefazat's support to split the Islamist opposition and stave off a conservative political challenge. Rather than contest Hefazat's anti-secular positions, the Awami League has acceded to several of the group's demands, including removing the statue of Lady Justice outside the Supreme Court building in Dhaka after Islamist groups complained it was a form of idol worship; allowing degrees from unregulated madrassas to be considered equivalent to master's degrees from universities; and accepting religiously inspired revisions to school textbooks, such as the removal of references to non-Muslim writers.⁶⁴

By 2020, the Awami League's embrace of Hefazat began to backfire. Emboldened by its political power, in December 2020 Hefazat opposed the construction of statues of Sheikh Mujib, because the movement considers statues un-Islamic.⁶⁵ In March 2021, Hefazat staged large anti-India protests—adding to other left-wing and conservative protests—during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh.⁶⁶ These incidents caused significant tension and at times violent confrontations between Hefazat supporters and security forces in the streets. The Awami League arrested and jailed many Hefazat leaders and activists following the anti-India protest. Despite increasing tension with the government, Hefazat's political and social power is significant. On the Awami League's watch, Hefazat has continued to expand its network of conservative madrassas and promote an illiberal brand of religious practice, social views, and Islamically informed governance among a growing proportion of the population.

NARROWING POLITICAL SPACE AND THE RADICALIZATION OF POLITICS

International democracy watchdogs have documented a steady decline of democratic freedom under the Awami League. Data from the Varieties of Democracy project indicate an erosion of “electoral democracy” and “liberal democracy” since the Awami League took power in 2009.⁶⁷ Freedom House’s Freedom in the World index puts Bangladesh’s freedom score at its lowest point since transitioning back to democracy in 1990.⁶⁸ The US State Department reports that under the Awami League, members of opposition parties and movements—along with dissenting journalists, civil society leaders, and ordinary citizens—have faced harassment, imprisonment, and even murder.⁶⁹ At the end of 2021, the United States excluded Bangladesh from its Summit for Democracy and placed sanctions on its security services over accusations of human rights violations. These significant and controversial diplomatic snubs are indications of the democratic decline over the last decade.

This decline is likely contributing to radicalization. Narrowing political space limits opportunity for within-system opposition to the state, particularly among religious conservatives who gravitate toward the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat.⁷⁰ Many upwardly mobile, conservative young men have their ascendance to social and political influence limited by political repression. As their daily lives diverge further from where they expect to be based on their educational and economic status, they have become increasingly radicalized. Moreover, the Awami League’s close alliance with Hindu-majority India inflames the grievances of religious conservatives of all economic strata. The marginalization of mainstream opposition parties pushes Muslim conservatives and other dissidents toward extreme options. Indeed, research shows that ISIS and al-Qaeda recruitment tactics in Bangladesh have recently focused on the Awami League’s insufficient Islamic conservatism, specifically its secular values, female leadership, and alliance with Hindu India.⁷¹

THE RADICALIZING EFFECT OF REGIONAL POLITICS

In addition to domestic factors, violent extremism in Bangladesh is linked to external dynamics. Purveyors of extremism cite examples of Muslim oppression and triumphalism in neighboring countries to promote their worldview. In recent years, extremist ideologies have been fed by events in three countries: India, Myanmar, and Afghanistan.

Under the Indian government’s current ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies amid rising Hindu nationalism have antagonized and mobilized Islamists in Bangladesh. In the Indian state of Assam, which borders Bangladesh, officials created a new registry of citizens in 2019, in accordance with national law, that could result in the deportation of thousands of Indians of Bengali descent who lack documentation of the date of their arrival in India.⁷² Many in Bangladesh view this effort as anti-Muslim—a suspicion deepened by a prominent Indian politician’s public reference to Bangladeshi migrants as “termites.”⁷³ Concurrent with this tension, the Indian parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 that provided a pathway for citizenship for persecuted religious minorities in neighboring countries, including Bangladesh. The CAA deeply offended Bangladeshi government officials, who argue that Hindus and other minorities are well treated. These actions,

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, thousands of Bangladeshis praised the victory on Facebook. Security analysts are concerned that the Taliban's achievement could inspire radicalization.

along with other instances of violence and discrimination against Muslims in India, have inspired significant anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh, particularly among religious conservatives, seen in the violent protests organized by Hefazat during Prime Minister Modi's visit in early 2021. Given the Awami League government's close alliance with India, this growing anti-India sentiment also

feeds broader illiberal views in Bangladesh.

Myanmar's treatment of its Muslim Rohingya minority also inflames extremism. In 2017, around 750,000 Rohingya fled into Bangladesh, escaping an ethnic cleansing campaign. Tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees were already in the country, and the combined figure for the Rohingya refugee population is nearly 1 million. In the squalid, teeming refugee camps, mainstream and militant Islamist groups are highly influential. Islamist groups, including Hefazat, run madrassas and mosques across the camps.⁷⁴ The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an Islamist militant group formerly known as Harakah al-Yaqin, is powerful in the camps. Given the group's long-standing links to Saudi Wahhabism, ARSA's growth has spurred mounting concern over the camps becoming a hotbed of terrorist recruitment that could spill over into Bangladesh.⁷⁵ In 2021, a prominent Rohingya civil society leader and opponent of Islamist influence in the camps was murdered, allegedly by ARSA. Moreover, the plight of the Rohingya is used for recruitment by AQIS and other jihadist groups.⁷⁶

The recent victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan has the potential to embolden extremists. As the Taliban marched toward Kabul, Bangladeshi police learned that at least three Bangladeshis had gone to Afghanistan to join the Taliban's fight.⁷⁷ Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, thousands of Bangladeshis praised the victory on Facebook.⁷⁸ Security analysts are concerned that the Taliban's achievement could inspire radicalization; encourage aspiring militants to travel to Afghanistan for training; revive local VEOs; and embolden transnational VEOs' recruitment efforts in Bangladesh.⁷⁹

MIGRANT WORKERS, THE DIASPORA, AND RADICALIZATION

Bangladesh has a large migrant worker and diaspora population that has thrived internationally. However, evidence suggests a trend of radicalization among a small subset of Bangladeshis abroad that has had domestic consequences. Two of the Holey Artisan attackers had been radicalized during their study at the Malaysia campus of Monash University.⁸⁰ Reporting also suggests that two dual Bangladeshi-Japanese citizens helped coordinate the attack from Japan.⁸¹ In 2016, a Singapore court sentenced four Bangladeshis to between 24 and 60 months in jail for plotting "to finance terror attacks in Bangladesh."⁸² More recently, in June 2018, Australian police brought terrorism charges against Bangladeshi-Australian Nowroz Amin, who was convicted of planning to return to Bangladesh to carry out terror attacks. In addition, there has been growing concern since 2016 about migrant workers being radicalized while abroad. Numerous Bangladeshi workers in Singapore have been deported for supporting jihadist ideologies and plotting attacks in Bangladesh.⁸³ In Australia in 2018, a 24-year-old Bangladeshi woman, apparently inspired by ISIS, stabbed an Australian man.⁸⁴

COVID-19 AND EXTREMISM

In early March 2020, the Bangladeshi government confirmed the country's first three COVID-19 cases and implemented lockdown measures that have fluctuated with the level of outbreak. Despite dire predictions about the potential public health impact of COVID-19, the numbers of confirmed cases and deaths have remained low as a percentage of the population. However, many observers have also been concerned about the effect of COVID-19 on extremism. At the height of the pandemic, a US government official noted that “stressors caused by the pandemic may contribute to an [extremist’s] decision to commit an attack or influence their target of choice.”⁸⁵ In Bangladesh, COVID-19 has exacerbated commonly perceived vulnerabilities to radicalization such as “unemployment, underemployment, income inequality, endemic corruption, and deprivation” among young people, especially those who are educated.⁸⁶

So far, the effect of the pandemic on extremism is unclear, but evidence indicates several concerning dynamics. First, the government’s response to COVID-19 has been rife with inefficiencies and corruption, which have been widely documented by the media. Shahab Khan, research director at the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, argues that because of this, Islamist groups have come to fill the aid gap with health care, loans, and food at the grassroots level, which in turn increases their public support.⁸⁷ Second, the rise of smartphone and internet access, combined with a pandemic-induced increase in internet use, has created a spike in online recruitment. A CTTTCU official said that while the counterterrorism unit has not collected conclusive data on the number of people radicalized during COVID-19, there has been a notable increase in the number of individuals who have joined radical groups on social media and other communications platforms.⁸⁸

Data collected during the early part of the pandemic confirm these concerns. In May 2020, seven AQIS YouTube channels saw over 100,000 new subscriptions.⁸⁹ In June 2020, subscriptions to violent extremist accounts on Bengali social media rose 8 percent to 2.7 million.⁹⁰ Researchers have noted a change in recruitment rhetoric during the pandemic. Bengali-language extremist literature now argues that COVID-19 is punishment for the government’s alleged anti-Islamic activities and that the solution is sharia and an Islamic state pursued through violence. VEOs have also framed traditional Islamic principles of cleanliness, charity, and food restrictions as ways to combat the pandemic.⁹¹ Although these recruitment efforts have not yet led to a surge in terrorism, they suggest that extremist groups perceive COVID-19 as a boon to their worldview.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Holey Artisan terrorist attack in July 2016 brought a long-standing issue to the attention of international and Bangladeshi policymakers. The counterterrorism and P/CVE response by the government and international donors has contributed to declining space for Islamist militancy, but the problem of extremism has by no means disappeared. Members of religious and sexual minorities are harassed, beaten, and killed along with secular, atheistic, and nonconforming Bangladeshis who speak out against regressive religious attitudes. Islamist political organizations that espouse illiberal ideologies are growing in popularity. And VEOs continue to operate, recruit, and carry out small-scale attacks while aspiring to perpetrate greater violence.

The persistence of extremism in Bangladesh is grounded in the contested religious character of the state. On the one hand, the political elite and mainstream society have cultivated a strong respect for tolerance, pluralism, women’s empowerment, and secularism that has buttressed a record of economic and human development that outpaces many of the country’s neighbors. On the other hand, countervailing regressive ideas and movements have deep historical roots and remain widely salient.⁹² This tension has created an enduring and expanding place for Islamist politics, while some Bangladeshis are radicalized into violent extremism. The contemporary problem of extremism is driven by a mix of deeply entrenched social dynamics and contemporary political, regional, and international factors that create an environment where religiously inspired illiberalism breeds and radicalization to violence occurs.

To counter this and push back successfully against extremism is a formidable task. But if the government is supported by both mainstream society and international donors and NGOs, a variety of measures, including the following six, can be taken that individually and collectively could weaken the appeal of religious illiberalism and extremism.

Promote social pluralism and tolerance. Surveys show that many ordinary Bangladeshis hold illiberal social attitudes. The education system, public radio and television, and cultural programs should work to foster tolerance for alternative beliefs, views, identities, and lifestyles.

Foster political pluralism and democracy. Democratic indices show a steady decline in space for dissent and open political competition in Bangladesh, particularly for moderate alternatives. Allowing greater debate and competition can render illiberal beliefs less appealing.

Maintain a “do no harm” approach to counterterrorism. Recent US sanctions against Bangladesh’s security services affirm long-standing allegations of human rights abuses. Some of those violations have taken place in the name of counterterrorism. An approach that emphasizes restraint and judicial action can be effective without inspiring anti-state violence. Officials should be encouraged to apply a counterterrorism approach grounded in respect for human rights.

Counter online radicalization. One of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to fuel a further increase in online extremist content and recruitment. Online counter-messaging and preventive messaging programs can blunt the impact of online recruitment. In addition, security forces must not only watch the online space closely but do so while respecting the right of ordinary citizens to express themselves freely online.

Provide economic opportunities for returning migrant workers. The presence of radicalization among Bangladeshis working abroad and expatriates indicates a need to ensure their positive reintegration into society when they return. For example, vocational training programs for returning workers and students returning can raise the opportunity costs of joining a VEO.

Promote interreligious comity in state action and diplomacy. Across South Asia, religious tension within and between countries is rising. The actions of Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists in one country are having an effect across borders. Drawing on its heritage of pluralism, Bangladesh should play a leading role in promoting cross-border interreligious dialogue and tolerance in the region.

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