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Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Politics in Bangladesh

Summary

- The role of Islam in Bangladeshi politics is highly contested and presents a focal point of past and current violence.
- The polarized political climate and institutionalized repression of Islamic parties appear to enhance radicalization dynamics.
- The current environment in Bangladesh presents an opportunity to prevent violent extremism before it fully manifests itself.
- Measures to improve democratic governance and inclusive politics could help mitigate the risk of violent extremism in Bangladesh, while also reducing political violence levels.

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Introduction

Bangladesh, a country previously known for its strongly secular and syncretic culture, is an emerging breeding ground for violent extremism. Over the past year, at least five prominent bloggers have been gruesomely murdered. Each man was hacked to death by machete-wielding extremists for the secular critiques of religious fanaticism they posted online. These murders accompanied the startling news of ISIS recruiters arrested in Dhaka.¹

In Bangladesh, radicalization and institutional dysfunction are closely connected. The increasingly authoritarian secular state provides radical Islamists a compelling grievance around which to recruit and mobilize. Political and social alienation have combined with government repression to push marginalized groups to violence. Therefore, efforts to prevent political violence in Bangladesh must target its weak democratic institutions, which foster exclusion, radicalization, and extremism. This approach to opposing Islamist violence would dovetail with a nascent shift in the field from traditional counterterrorism to preventive approaches—which moves emphasis from the reactive use of force, law enforcement, intelligence collection, and counter messaging to strengthening political and social institutions.²

Violent extremism first captured attention in Bangladesh with a string of increasingly spectacular attacks throughout the early and mid-2000s. In 2001 and 2002, bomb blasts ripped through a Bengali new year's celebration, a communist party gathering, and four movie theaters. In 2004, terrorists hurled thirteen grenades into a crowded campaign event in a failed attempt to kill then former

prime minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed. In August of 2005, nearly 500 homemade bombs exploded within a 30-minute period in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts. The attacks were carried out by Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an indigenous extremist organization dedicated to creating a fundamentalist Islamist state in the country.

Though the synchronized explosions killed only two people, JMB's dramatic display of religious militancy quickly captured global attention. After a double suicide bombing three months later, the government banned JMB, Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami, and other extremist organizations. It also began aggressive counterterrorism activities that splintered and marginalized the major violent extremist groups. Despite this effort, the political ideology of Islamism has remained powerful.

Islam and the State in Bangladesh

Despite the ostensibly recent rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh, the violent contest over the Islamic character of the state is grounded in a long history. As part of Pakistan (1947–71), many ethnic Bengalis chafed under the control of a Punjabi-dominated, Urdu-speaking elite in the western half of the country. Bengalis constituted over half of Pakistan's population and produced most of its economic output but were treated as culturally and politically inferior. This festering resentment grew into a declaration of independence in 1971. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his political party, the Awami League, led Bangladesh's nationalist movement against Pakistan's army, which had invaded to put down the insurrection. Over the course of nine months, Pakistan's soldiers killed—according to the highest estimate—three million Bengalis, including the indiscriminate massacre of students and intellectuals. A mass rape campaign also brutalized approximately two hundred thousand women. The war came to a quick and decisive end two months after the intervention of India, which presided over Pakistan's surrender to the newly formed nation of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's independence war is the genesis of the secular-Islamic divide that still shapes the country's politics. The Awami League's secular nationalist movement was opposed by Jamaat-e-Islami, a religious political movement that favored a unified, Islamic Pakistan. Jamaat activists collaborated with the Pakistani army, forming paramilitary forces that were implicated in some of the worst atrocities in the war. After independence, Mujib, Bangladesh's first president, banned Jamaat, whose leadership had fled to Pakistan. Jamaat, however, would not last long in exile; Mujib was assassinated in 1975.

Mujib's successor Zia Rahman unbanned Jamaat and integrated its leadership into a political alliance led by his party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Mujib personifies the political division in Bangladesh today. The independence movement and his assassination are the two events that define the antagonism between the country's two main political parties. Currently, the Awami League is led by Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, and the BNP is headed by Zia's widow, Khaleda Zia. Political competition between these two women and their parties is quite literally a blood feud, which is destructively mapped onto the country's religious schism.

The Politics of Violent Extremism

The renewal of extremism represented by the bloggers' killings is tied to the creeping secular authoritarianism of the Awami League. The BNP and Jamaat boycotted the most recent election in January 2014, which gave the Awami League an illegitimate victory amid widespread violence. The election typified the Awami League's rule since its election in 2008, which has been marked by controversial decisions that have stoked secular-Islamic tension and bred radicalization.

The end of the caretaker system. In order to ensure fair elections, Bangladesh adopted a “caretaker government” in 1996 through which the chief justice of the high court assumed the head of government and conducted the election free of partisan manipulation. But a decade later Bangladesh’s entrenched partisanship corrupted the caretaker system. The parties disagreed on who should administer the caretaker government for the 2007 election. After not getting its choice, the opposition Awami League initiated street protests and declared its intent to boycott the election. In January 2007, the military intervened to break the political stalemate, declaring a state of emergency. The two-year, military-backed caretaker government attempted to clean up Bangladeshi politics. Much to the dismay of party officials, it pursued corruption charges against Awami League head Sheikh Hasina and the sons of BNP chairwoman Khaleda Zia. After the 2008 elections, the triumphant Awami League ended the caretaker government system that had targeted its leader. The decision prompted the opposition BNP to declare a boycott of any election not held under a neutral authority.

The war crimes tribunal. Since the war of independence, many Bangladeshis have called for a war crimes tribunal to investigate the atrocities committed by West Pakistan sympathizers, primarily the current leaders of Jamaat. In 2009, the Awami League fulfilled its campaign pledge to begin organizing tribunals, which disproportionately targeted Jamaat leaders. Despite initial international support for the trials, a leaked U.S. State Department cable noted, “There is little doubt that hard-line elements within the ruling party [Awami League] believe that the time is right to crush Jamaat and other Islamic parties.” Indeed, several prominent Jamaat leaders have been convicted and executed during the tribunal, prompting large protests by its supporters.

These two decisions—the elimination of the caretaker government and the implementation of the war crimes tribunal—are closely connected to the recent rise of violent extremism. The men arrested for blogger Niloy Chatterjee’s August 2015 murder were leaders of the Jamaat’s student wing, Chhatra Shibir.³ Chatterjee was a vocal proponent of the death penalty for Jamaat leaders convicted in the war crimes trial. Other blogger attacks have been linked to a new extremist group called Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). According to Bangladeshi police, ABT is an al-Qaeda inspired offshoot with connections to Chhatra Shibir.⁴

Chhatra Shibir is a key source of Jamaat’s political power. Though Jamaat has at times partnered with the Awami League in the past, its historical and current political alliance is with the BNP. During national elections, Jamaat receives little support, but its loyal and disciplined youth cadres in Chhatra Shibir vote, protest, harass, and organize at the behest of their senior political partners in the BNP. In return, Jamaat, which advocates Sharia law, has important influence with one of Bangladesh’s two major political parties. When the Awami League ended the caretaker government and established the war crimes tribunal, the Islamic parties saw a secular party centralizing political power and attacking their interests. Jamaat’s English-language website argues, “After failing to establish any link between Jamaat and corruption or terrorism, allegations of war crimes are now unfairly being made against it.”⁵

The perception of partisanship directed against the chief Islamic party and its current political sponsor creates a dangerous environment for radicalization. In 2011 the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute conducted a nationwide survey examining various dimensions of terrorism in Bangladesh.⁶ The survey asked participants to explain the reasons a Bangladeshi might join a terrorist organization: Around 40 percent identified the use of Islam “to gain political ends;” another 20 percent said “lack of democracy.” With the Awami League consolidating control through institutional manipulation, the Islamic parties play the role of aggrieved outsider. Under these conditions, Islamic appeals have featured prominently in Jamaat’s rhetoric. The party’s website declares that its work for “the country and Islam” has provoked “political harassment, attack...[and] oppression and torture.”⁷ Although Jamaat’s

connection to the bloggers' deaths and other acts of extremism is indirect, its political exclusion and oppression creates anger that ripples beyond its active membership to Islamist allies and sympathizers, such as ABT.

Addressing Violent Radicalization through Inclusive Politics

Bangladesh's flawed democratic process feeds frustration and drives radicalization. Though radicalization and extremism have many causes—and traditional counterterrorism approaches have an important role to play—strengthening Bangladesh's election institutions would enhance political inclusion and undermine the grievance-complex that bolsters radical recruitment. A recent evaluation of election-violence prevention tools conducted by the U.S. Institute of Peace has identified a set of weaknesses in Bangladesh's electoral process that could be addressed as a way to prevent violent extremism and related conflict dynamics.

- *Security Sector Reform*: Elements of the country's police and army operate as political militias rather than provide nonpartisan security. Allegations of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and opposition harassment damage the legitimacy of the democratic process. Efforts should be made to ensure a nonpartisan security sector.
- *Election Management Reform*: Bangladesh's election commission is deeply partisan and ineffectual. This gives opposition parties little reason to trust the process or outcome of elections. The election commission needs to be given independent power and the necessary resources and be sheltered from partisan manipulation.
- *Enhancing Democratic Norms*: The peacebuilding community engages actively through violence prevention programs worldwide; however, these practices are almost entirely absent in Bangladesh. Civic education and youth-targeted trainings in particular could weaken support for extremism. Offering technical support to political parties and their student wings may also help create a more professional and inclusive political party system. Though institutional reforms are likely more pressing, peacebuilding programs can alter the attitudinal disposition toward violence over time.

Bangladesh has a long history of political and electoral violence that has shaped its political culture. Protests, boycotts, and intense oppositional politics are defining features of Bangladesh's authoritarian and democratic eras. However, the increasingly radical character of the country's politics adds a newfound urgency to strengthen its democratic institutions. The ruling party's politics of exclusion and violence against an opposition strongly associated with Islamic politics make extremist outbidding a potent election strategy: If the political system does not allow Islamic voices, then oppose the system. This problem is best addressed through institutional reforms that enhance the democratic character of Bangladesh.

Notes

1. Shiv Malik, Aisha Gani, and Saad Hammadi, "Briton Arrested in Bangladesh 'Confessed to Recruiting' for Isis," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/briton-arrested-bangladesh-recruiting-islamic-state.
2. John Hudson, "Inside the Fight Over Obama's Terror Summit," *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/17/inside-the-fight-over-obamas-terror-summit/>.
3. Tom Porter, "Bangladesh: Three Arrested Following Murder of Blogger Niloy," *International Business Times*, November 19, 2015, www.ibtimes.co.uk/bangladesh-three-arrested-following-murder-blogger-niloy-1529522.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief examines the relationship between radicalization and institutional dysfunctions in Bangladesh and addresses how strengthening political and social institutions, and making them more inclusive, can help prevent violent extremism and related conflict dynamics. Geoffrey Macdonald, PhD is a consultant at the United States Institute of Peace.

4. "Blogger Rajib's 'Killers' Linked to al-Qaeda: DB," *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), March 15, 2013, <http://archive.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/blogger-rajibs-killers-linked-to-al-qaeda-db/>.
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6. Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, "The State of Terrorism in Bangladesh, 2010–2011" (BEI: Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 2011).
7. Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, "Introduction," March 1, 2012, www.jamaat-e-islami.org/en/details.php?artid=MTQ4.



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