

Political Violence in Bangladesh: Trends and Causes

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Abstract

Since the events of March 1971, Bangladesh has seldom been free from violence. While much of the recent attention revolves around religious extremism and militancy, political violence, as this paper argues, is a larger problem for Bangladesh. At every level of society, Bangladesh has had to confront with acts of violence. Lack of governance impedes the polity from effectively controlling violence, organised and unorganised, against different sections of society. Prolonged military rule, the perennial problem of political intolerance and growth of religious extremism have contributed to this trend.

Violence is prevalent across the society but the state remains inert.

*Daily Star*¹

Political violence is not unique to Bangladesh. Most developing countries suffer from far more serious bouts of internal turmoil. It is, however, possible to differentiate violence in Bangladesh from that of other South Asian countries. Political violence can be defined as acts carried out by individuals or groups with an explicit desire of accomplishing a particular political objective or directed at the party in power to secure political concessions or compromises that are otherwise not possible. As against the Sri Lankan and Nepalese examples, political violence in Bangladesh is not rooted in ethnicity (conflict of the Chakmas being an exception). Likewise, unlike in Pakistan (for example, MQM and Shia-Sunni violence), it is not sectarian. Nor is it communal, something that is prevalent in parts of India. Unlike other states in South Asia, violence in Bangladesh has a special feature – it flows from a society that is highly politicised and increasingly intolerant. Therefore, while independent Bangladesh has not witnessed the type of conflict and violence that Sri Lanka or Nepal are witnessing, or even what Pakistan has been going through, it increasingly has a charged and violent political environment.

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Even the absence of military rule and ushering of democracy has not fundamentally curbed the ability and willingness of various political parties to resort to violence in achieving their objectives. This lack of political tolerance coupled with weak democratic institutions make Bangladesh a unique case in South Asia.

A discussion of political violence in Bangladesh would refer to violent tactics employed by political parties and groups opposed to the government in power with an explicit desire to secure a political concession. It would also include protest actions that often transform into violence such as *hartals*, *bandhs* (complete cessation of public activities during a political strike) and other non-parliamentary methods adopted by various political parties. Indeed, it is the vitiating climate that enables political groups to resort to violence in order to express and achieve their political/social goals.

Social violence and religious extremism feeds into, and shapes the larger context of, political violence in Bangladesh. The struggle between activists belonging to different parties also contributes significantly to the politics of violence. Apart from *hartals* and other forms of mass protests, religious violence against secular targets nowadays is being carried out with an explicit political agenda and by Islamic militants. Violence against the minorities in Bangladesh, namely Chakmas and Hindus, is classified as political in this paper.

The Contours of Political Violence

As Appendix 1 (bomb blasts between 1999-May 2005) indicates, there has been a constant and gradual growth of violence in Bangladesh and the country's deteriorating law and order situation has emerged as a major threat to domestic stability. Political intolerance and violence affects all tiers of the state and society. Notwithstanding the institutionalisation of electoral democracy, political tolerance is lacking and criminalisation of politics has become an established norm with criminals/dons being the patrons and the main beneficiaries of the politicians. Money power plays a large role in this nexus between criminals and politicians.²

Ironically for a country that has been ruled by women since 1991, Bangladesh has the dubious distinction of having the highest number of battered women in the world.³ Of all forms of violence on women, the acid attack is the most lethal and frequently used method in Bangladesh.⁴

The 2001 *Jatiya Sangsad* (parliament) election was fought on the plank of restoring law and order. The BNP election manifesto even promised special courts in every district to deal “with heinous crimes like repression of women, abduction, acid burning, extortion and the like.”⁵ But compelled by the deteriorating situation in October 2002, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda called in the army to assist the civil administration in fighting growing acts of terror. Named *Operation Clean Heart*, the nationwide operation lasted until the following January.

The government’s decision to rely on the army to tackle internal violence underscores a major problem facing Bangladesh. While initially the action was widely welcomed, it soon came to be perceived as another mechanism for political witch-hunting. This operation showed some initial signs of success, and resulted in the confiscation of a huge cache of small arms and weapons (2,028 weapons and 29,754 rounds of ammunitions) as also the arrest of many criminals (11,280). In the end, however, it had very little effect in reducing the overall rate of violence or unlawful acts. Moreover, the Joint Forces Indemnity Act (February 2003) passed in the *Jatiya Sangsad* amidst stiff opposition, granted immunity to the army for all its actions during the operation, adding to civilian fears and apprehensions.

Despite the marginal success of the earlier operation, on July 19, 2003, the government launched a similar operation, *Spider Web*, involving 14,000 personnel from the police, the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles, the Ansar militia auxiliary force and the coast guard. Also, unlike the earlier operation, *Spider Web* was confined to the south-western districts (the region covering Jhenidah, Kushtia, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Jessore, Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat and few more adjacent districts). This operation targeted the Left extremists of the region. However, it was unable to make any real dent in the extremism, which continues to take place there.⁶

Moreover, the criminal justice system in Bangladesh is in a crisis.⁷ The judiciary, especially at the lower levels, is often accused of being an extension of the ruling party. For instance, the Begum Khaleda government appointed a judicial commission in December 2001 to investigate the Baniachar bombing that had taken place when Sheikh Hasina was in power. In its report submitted in September 2002, the commission blamed Sheikh Hasina and other Awami League members for six of the seven bomb attacks that occurred from 1999 to June 2001. Also, two of the three members of the commission dissented with its report, alleging that the commission

head, Justice Abdul Bari Sarkar, had inserted his personal views in the final report. Also, despite many investigations and commissions, no reports have been made public about the bomb blasts that took place after Begum Khaleda came to power nor have any arrests been made in that connection. Such trends lead to strong suggestions of partisanship and political witch-hunting.⁸

As discussed earlier, *Operation Clean Heart* resulted in the confiscation of large quantities of arms. That apart, in April 2004, the largest arms cache in Bangladeshi history was confiscated from the Chittagong port area. There have also been other instances when huge quantities of small arms were found in Bogra (northwestern Bangladesh) in June 2003 as well as in Dhaka. The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) have become the principal conduit for trafficking small arms into Bangladesh. There are indications that Bangladesh is on the verge of becoming the “biggest clandestine arms supplier” in South Asia.⁹

Students who occupied a critical place in the liberation struggle have ironically contributed to the growing culture of violence in Bangladesh. University campuses have not only become the staging arena for the political parties but also a turf for socio-political violence. Indeed, student bodies of BNP and the *Jama'at*, the partner in the national government, have been at odds on the campus. Clashes between student groups, associated with and identified with political parties, often result in violent confrontations and deaths. The violence on the campuses reached such alarming heights that a number of universities had to ban student politics.¹⁰ Indeed, political violence has been the product of two distinct trends: the intolerant political culture and the intervention of the military in politics.

Political Violence in the New State

The birth of Bangladesh and violence are intertwined in such a fashion that it is hard to separate the two. An estimated one million Bengalis died in the military repression that lasted until the defeat of Pakistan in December. Since then, violence has remained inseparable from Bangladeshi politics and society. If the struggle for liberation from West Pakistani domination raised the expectations of a free and non-oppressive state, post-war conditions proved to be conducive for violence and social unrest. Unfulfilled popular expectations resulted in the alienation of different sections of society from the mainstream and popular discontent and

disappointment, which often manifested itself in aggression and violence.

Upon his release from Pakistani prison in January 1972, Mujibur Rahman took over the reigns of the war-torn country. The violence that had consecrated Bengali nationalism added to the normal problems associated with a new state. As it was seeking international recognition, Bangladesh had the daunting task of nation- building, re-structuring and accommodating the needs and aspirations of different groups, especially freedom fighters. The neglect of the economy, the prime reason behind the civil war, had to be redressed immediately. The military, whose overall image had been tainted by the brutality since March 1971, had to be reorganised and its duties defined. Mujib, unsure of relying on the existing military (comprising largely of anti-liberation forces), set up his rival force *Rakkhi Bahini*. This was something that did not go down well with the military establishment. The military mix was peculiar and unstable, as the spate of coups and counter-coups that followed reveal, given its diverse constituents of freedom fighters and repatriates from Pakistan. Prolonged military rule in Pakistan only made matters worse. The opposition of the *Jama'at* to the liberation of Bangladesh and its collaboration with Pakistan during the war generated additional tension and misgiving in the minds of the secular forces in the country. Thriving on the war-torn environment, extremist groups such as *Sarbohara Party* and *Gonobahini* of *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal* resorted to terrorism to combat feudal elements. To make matters worse, in 1974 Bangladesh witnessed successive droughts and cyclones causing havoc and misery to an already impoverished country.

Mounting internal problems, resource limitations and short-sighted political leadership brought the country to a situation where a violent upheaval became inevitable. Unable to respond to growing public unrest and protests, the leadership turned authoritarian. On December 28, 1974, Mujib declared a state of emergency and suspended all civil and democratic rights. In a session that lasted no more than a few hours, on January 25, 1975, the *Jatiya Sangsad* (national parliament) hastily approved the Fourth Amendment. This fundamentally altered the political system and replaced the parliamentary system with the presidential system and institutionalised single-party rule in Bangladesh. Mujib who won almost all seats he contested in 1971 by amassing 97.6 per cent of the votes, banned all political parties, and announced the formation of the *Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League* (BAKSAL), a conglomeration of different existing parties. The stage was thus set for a violent confrontation.

On August 15, 1975, a group of army officers struck back and assassinated not only Mujib but also almost his entire family. Khondkar Moshtaq, who then assumed power, was similarly ousted by a few military officers led by Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf, a known supporter of the Awami League. The saga of violence, however, continued and four liberation leaders – Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, M. Mansur Ali and A.H.M. Kamruzzaman of the Awami League – were killed in November 1975.¹¹ The situation finally stabilised when Gen Zia-ur Rahman took over as Chief Martial Law Administrator in 1976 (who formally became President in 1977). But with the assassination of Gen Zia-ur Rehman in Chittagong on May 30, 1981, the political uncertainty returned and in less than a year, Chief of Staff H.M.Ershad took over in March 1982 from President Abdus Sattar who had assumed power after Zia-ur Rahman's death. Ershad's dictatorship continued till 1991 when he was overthrown by a wave of popular protests.

Thus, Mujib's short tenure sowed the early seeds of political intolerance in Bangladesh and this was sharpened under the prolonged military regime. Similarly, until 1991, the military and its frequent forays into the political arena contributed to violence in the country. The political violence, manifest often through street power, has an unique contribution to Bangladeshi politics.

Street Power

As can be recalled, street power was instrumental in bringing in democracy to Bangladesh in 1991. When united for a cause, the people of Bangladesh have been able to accomplish much more than any other populace of the region. Extra-parliamentary agitations or *hartals*, are often used to reverse some of the blatantly undemocratic policy decisions by elected governments.¹²

The first sense of this street power was evident in the initial years of Ershad's tenure (1982-1991). All major opposition parties came together and called for a *bandh* in November 1983 demanding an end to martial law and for the restoration of fundamental rights. A similar move in March 1985 resulted in widespread violence and led to hundreds of casualties among demonstrators and security personnel. The protests took place despite the imposition of martial law restrictions and the placing of major opposition leaders including Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda under

house arrest. The concerted popular effort eventually resulted in the removal of Ershad's military dictatorship in 1991 and the ushering in of multiparty democracy.

The events leading up to the 1996 elections highlight the strength of the street power. In March 1994, the Awami League lost the by-election in Magura, its traditional stronghold. The government was accused of rigging the outcome and the opposition launched an indefinite boycott of the *Jatiya Sangsad*. This was the beginning of a sustained opposition campaign that eventually ensured that the BNP did not complete its full five-year term. The opposition through persistent programmes of street marches, demonstrations and strikes, worked towards the resignation of the Begum Khaleda government. The farcical *Jatiya Sangsad* elections held in February 1996 amidst the boycott of the entire opposition merely intensified the popular protests, demonstrations and other forms of agitational politics. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was eventually forced to annul the results and dissolve the newly constituted parliament. Bowing to street power, Begum Khaleda introduced a neutral caretaker government to organise, conduct and officiate *Jatiya Sangsad* elections. This has since become a norm in Bangladesh.¹³

Similarly during the tenure of Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001), the BNP-led seven-party opposition alliance resorted to agitations to remove the Awami League government. The anti-Sheikh Hasina agitations held during October-November 1998 turned violent and seven people were killed in street protests. Likewise in February 2000, business in Bangladesh came to halt when the opposition protested against planned government legislation designed to prevent street disorder. According to some estimates, during 1991-96, when Begum Khaleda was in power the Awami League organised 173 days of hartals and the BNP retaliated by 85 days of work stoppage when Sheikh Hasina was in power (1996-2001).¹⁴ Thus, street power often brings Bangladesh to a grinding halt. *Bandhs* and *hartals* have become common instruments for political parties to press for their demands. Various political parties depend on them for their growth, thrive on such street power and in the process contribute to violence in the society.

The extreme Left is a major source of organised political violence. Disillusioned with the 'abandoning' of its Leftist ideologies, soon after the liberation of Bangladesh, a large group of young cadres broke from the Awami League to take up a more radical stance. "We had been Leftists for

long. The national liberation struggle was the first step in the total revolution. The unfinished revolution must now be completed.”¹⁵ Certain parts of Bangladesh were soon deeply affected by the extremism of this Leftist group that targeted rich peasants, businessmen, ruling party politicians and the police. The rural poor were forced to provide them with support and shelter while they carried out their activities. In fact, their heightened activity, including individual terrorist acts, during the Sheikh Hasina regime (1996-2001) forced the government to introduce stringent laws against violence (Public Safety, Special Provisions Bill). Ten Left extremist groups, including the Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP), or Sarbahara, are active in south western Bangladesh; seven outlawed outfits are active in 19 districts and three others operate locally.

Another form of political violence in Bangladesh is the attacks against minorities, namely the Buddhist Chakmas and Hindus. The former are confined to the CHT and hence their contribution to overall violence is limited. The organised, persistent violence against Hindus is a relatively new phenomenon. From 1975 to the present, attacks against minorities have taken on a different colour, ranging from being simply communal to a mix of both religious and political. The first large scale onslaught against Hindus was direct political action in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. But in recent times, attacks on Hindus, especially after the 2001 electoral violence, have taken on alarming proportions and have become a politically induced phenomena.¹⁶

Religious Extremism

Over the last decade, more specifically in the past few years, Bangladesh is evidently becoming more religious than ever before. The notion of being Islamic has gained increasing acceptance, legitimacy and popularity. In the post-Mujib phase, military dictators sought legitimacy through religion but since 1991, religious parties that were previously banned have gained much ground and have played an important role in different governments. *Jama'at* and *Islami Oikya Jote* are partners in the present BNP-led government. In tune with the growth of religious credence, even the secular Awami League has transformed itself. It is now subscribing to religious symbolism, a trend that was actually started by Bangabandhu himself. During the 2001 *Jatiya Sangsad* elections, the Awami League promised not to enact any legislation contrary to the Quran and pledged to establish

a *sharia* bench at the Supreme Court. Instead of dismissing this as a dilution of secularism, one has to view the Awami League's new found love for religion as its belated recognition of the rightward shift of society and its attempt to win over the growing segment of the religiously inclined electorate.

Strangely enough, in a state that has successfully changed its national identity from Bengali (connoting a secular cultural identity) to being Bangladeshi (connoting a shift towards religious Islamic identity), the first incident of popular protest came in February 1983, when the masses united to oppose Gen Ershad's move to introduce English and Arabic as compulsory subjects in primary and secondary schools.¹⁷ Over the years, this secular trend has been replaced by conservatism and religious extremism. The secular Constitution was replaced with Islamic orientated amendments by Gen Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981), who removed secularism from the four state principles and replaced them with "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim" (in the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful). Article 8-1 which contained the principles of secularism was replaced by the words, "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah..." Article 12, which outlined the implementation of the principle of secularism, was totally omitted.

A number of incidents in recent years underscore the religious underpinnings of violence in Bangladesh. Even though the origin of Islamisation can be traced to Mujib and his military successors, democratisation of Bangladesh has also contributed to religious extremism. To put it succinctly, religious parties and extremism flourish under electoral politics and coalition arithmetic. To understand their importance and significance, it is essential to innumerate some of the major violent incidents that have been directly linked to religious extremism.

Religious fanaticism was always evident albeit sporadically in Bangladesh¹⁸ but its increasing appeal became visible for the first time in the controversy surrounding the feminist writer Taslima Nasreen. In a radio interview during the March 1994 Magura by-election, Taslima called for a revision of the Quranic text in tune with contemporary society. This evoked extreme reactions from the religious scholars and orthodox sections. The resultant *fatwa* and eventual banishment of Taslima from Bangladesh were followed up by a demand for the imposition of *sharia* and for the expulsion of Western aid workers from Bangladesh. On October 13, 2002,

responding to a case filed by a local *Jama'at-e-Islami* leader, a secular court sentenced Taslima in absentia to a one-year prison term for her "derogatory remarks about Islam."¹⁹ Since the Taslima episode, the issue of *fatwa* draws widespread attention in Bangladesh.

Of late, issuance of death threats have multiplied and various prominent politicians, intellectuals and journalists have received threats from extremist groups. Maulana Patowary of *Mujahideen-al-Islam* has accused those against whom death threats were issued of acting against Islam and of being a barrier against the jihadi groups reinstating the fundamentalist way of life.²⁰ Ties with deep-seated conservatism continue to linger in certain parts of Bangladesh. In defiance of the official rules, an Imam and his assistant barred female tourists from entering the historic 15th century Shatgambuj Mosque in Bagerhat.²¹

Religious extremists issued threats (August 2004) against *Prothom Alo*, one of Bangladesh's largest vernacular dailies, following an investigative story, "Terrorist Activities in Greater Chittagong."²² Several Islamic groups began staging protests against the newspaper, including the Islamic fundamentalist party, Islamic United Front. Copies of *Prothom Alo* were burnt, its billboards brought down and in one incident a furious mob attempted to ransack the newspaper's office. At a protest in Chittagong on August 21, Fazlul Haq Amini, an MP belonging to the Islamic United Front, demanded that *Prothom Alo* be banned and its editor, Motiur Rahman, arrested.

The Begum Khaleda government could also be accused of being prejudiced. Despite many stories in the domestic as well as international press, the government has been in a denial mode. Some government actions speak louder than their stated positions. The well-known periodical, *Far Eastern Economic Review* was banned for its story about the rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh.²³ The government's rigid stance was apparent in the arrest of journalist Shahriar Kabir in November 2003, for making a documentary on attacks on Hindus by fundamentalists in the immediate aftermath of the October 2001 *Jatiya Sangsad* elections.²⁴

Although these actions generated huge criticism, given the culture of witch-hunting that is prevalent in the country, state controls are just another mechanism to curb and intimidate the opposition. The growing Islamic extremism has become an issue that is more of a contest between the two warring political parties rather than one pertaining to national security. As

the print and electronic media in Bangladesh in recent years has multiplied rapidly, in the first ten months of 2004 alone more than 20 cases of physical attacks or threats against journalists by the BNP or its various arms have been reported.²⁵ The media is subjected to harassment, intimidation, repression and hooliganism by state parties and also by non-state actors seriously undermining the free press in Bangladesh. Both Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda have intimidated the media when they carried unfavourable reports and coverage.

According to a RSF (Reporters Without Borders) survey, more than 110 journalists were physically attacked, 130 threatened and 25 were arrested. They were the victims of attacks by Islamic militants as well as intimidation by the government.²⁶ Extremely violent and disturbing statements have often been made against journalists by certain leaders, particularly *Jatiya Sangsad* member Maulana Delwar Hossain Sayeedi (*Jama'at*).²⁷ Apart from general violence and the vitiating climate, one of the main targets of extremist violence have been the *Ahmadiyas*, the heterodox Islamic sect.

Violence Against Ahmadiyas

There are approximately 100,000 Ahmadiyas in Bangladesh and most are concentrated in Dhaka. The Ahmadiya, a small Muslim sect not recognised by fundamentalists as being truly Muslim, has had to endure persecution and continuous assault. For the last few years there has been a surge in sectarian violence in Bangladesh and a group of mainstream Muslims organisations, have been demanding the declaration of Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims. *Islami Oikya*, *Jote* a partner in the present ruling alliance, has been at the forefront of this demand.

In October 2003, 17 Ahmadiya families were attacked in Khustia and were confined to their houses for several days. At a public rally at the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque, Shamsul Haq, president of Amra Dhakabasi, demanded that the government declare Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims. A mob of 5,000 attempted to destroy an Ahmadiya mosque in Tejgaon in Dhaka. In December 2003, anti-Ahmadiya militants killed an Ahmadiya leader in Jessore.²⁸

Groups of anti-Ahmadiya believers have periodically attacked Ahmadiya places of worship and more often than not, little or no action was taken by the government forces to curb the attacks.²⁹ Furthermore, anti-Ahmadiya

forces have often threatened that they would launch nationwide agitations, if their demands were not met. For its part, in a bid to appease the conservatives, the government also withdrew cases against 12,000 anti-Ahmadiya activists who had been charged with attacking an Ahmadiyya mosque in Dhaka and assaulting policemen in December 2003.

Bowing to anti-Ahmadiya pressures, on January 8, 2004, the Begum Khaleda government imposed a ban on Ahmadiya publications. Police have also seized documents from Ahmadiya mosques. According to the *Religious Freedom Report of 2004*, only US intervention prevented the Bangladesh government from declaring the Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims and to postpone proposed legislations by a BNP parliamentarian that “would have created a blasphemy law based on the Pakistani model.”³⁰ A far more serious threat than religious extremism comes in the form of bomb blasts and other terrorist acts that have become common in Bangladesh.

Terrorism and Islamic Extremism

According to the Awami League report on ‘Growing Fanaticism and Extremism in Bangladesh’ released in February 2005, there have been 34 bomb blasts between 1999 and February 2005. Since the first major bomb blast in Udichi on March 6, 1999, such attacks have increased considerably in recent times and there were 16 such blasts in the last two years, of which the two most significant ones were on Sheikh Hasina at a rally in August 2004 and on SMAS Kibria on January 27, 2005.

One can discern certain distinct patterns in the recent terror attacks that have taken place in Bangladesh. First, the bomb attacks were often aimed at causing huge casualties and hence the attackers targeted crowded places like cinema halls, cultural gatherings, and political rallies (mostly Awami League rallies). Second, such blasts have taken places at gatherings, which are often labelled by the Islamists as ‘un-Islamic.’³¹ The recovery of bombs from Jamatul Mujhahideen groups in Gaibandha in November 2004, were believed to be intended for a cultural gathering at Bogra.³² Also, all the recent bomb blasts have, according to senior investigation officers, seen the use of similar type of bombs.³³

Moreover, people from different walks of life but with a common secular orientation have become the principal target of violent attacks.

Those targeted pursue a secular lifestyle or are involved in cultural activities. They include the first Muslim British High Commissioner and other Awami League personalities such as Sheikh Hasina, Suranjit Sengupta, the Mayor of Sylhet and many other Awami League leaders.³⁴ The sudden departure of the World Bank Country Director in Bangladesh, Christine I. Wallich, in mid-2004 was preceded by a death threat she received from unidentified Islamic militant groups. Though she has since returned to Bangladesh, the incident reflects the prevailing security situation in Bangladesh. Despite the increased violence against individuals, it is pertinent to note that none of the leaders of the ruling BNP or its alliance partners have been the target of such attacks.

Since the Udichi attack which took place when the Awami League was in power, Sheikh Hasina has accused the BNP and its Right-wing allies of condoning and encouraging external militant and terrorist groups inside Bangladesh. Given the escalation of terror and violence since the BNP victory in October 2001, the opposition, especially the Awami League, has intensified its accusations against the BNP-led alliance of turning a blind eye to the growing presence of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh.

It is widely recognised that a number of transnational Islamic terrorist groups including the Al Qaida, have established a presence in Bangladesh.³⁵ For instance, Indian investigations into the January 22, 2002 attack on the US Consulate in Kolkata, revealed international linkages between the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and the Harkat-ul-Jihadi-Islami (HUJI) branches of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Indeed, the Asif Reza Commando Force (ARCF), which initially claimed responsibility for the attack, is essentially a criminal group allied to the HUJI in Bangladesh.

The negative reactions to Islamic extremism have compelled the Jama'at, the principal beneficiary of the growth of Islamic undercurrents in Bangladesh to respond.³⁶ Though the main ally of the ruling BNP, the *Jama'at* has the potential to emerge as an alternative to the two personality-dominated, family-oriented and feud-ridden political parties that dominate Bangladesh today,³⁷ it is not prepared to undermine its painstakingly secured political legitimacy. At the same time however, concerns over the extremist leanings and linkages of *Jama'at* come against the background of the religious party making significant political gains.

Base for External Militants

The attitude of Bangladesh, especially since Begum Khaleda returned to power in 2001, towards militancy in India's Northeast is a critical component. Even though the turmoil in the region has not spilled over beyond India, Bangladeshi support, if not connivance, in the ongoing militancy in the Northeast is widely recognised.³⁸ Despite repeated official denials, it is well-documented that a number of militant groups active in India function and operate from safe havens in Bangladesh. Dhaka has remained indifferent towards Indian demands for extradition of militant leaders like Anup Chetia and Paresh Baruah.

A far more serious Bangladeshi involvement can be seen in the case of the Rohingya Muslims, the non-Burmese ethnic group of Myanmar. Fighting against the central military junta, they operate from safe havens in Bangladesh. Unlike the Indian militants, the Rohingyas enjoy religious affinity with the Bangladeshis and hence receive large scale political as well as logistical support. Of late, the Rohingyas have emerged as the prime recruits for Al Qaida for their operations in Bangladesh as well as outside. There are suggestions that other Bangladeshi extremist groups such as HUJI have recruited and used the Rohingyas for militant activities against their opponents.³⁹

With the exception of the Rohingyas, the safe havens for external militant groups have not yet directly lead to internal violence in Bangladesh. At the same time, these groups do forge close links with extremist groups and criminal elements and thereby contribute to the large scale violence in the country. Thus, given the laxity of the government and the existing deep rooted problems of governance, Bangladesh could end up being a nerve, centre for some of the militant groups from neighbouring countries. As evinced in Pakistan, this could lead to serious domestic repercussions over which Bangladesh would hardly have any control.

Mitigating Factors

Despite these alarming trends, there are some mitigating developments that indicate that there is no unbridled growth of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh. The language movement of 1952, the precursor to the liberation movement of Bangladesh, was essentially secular and cultural in nature. Despite the various swings from being Bengali first to being Bangladeshi

later denoting a dilution of its secular cultural ethos to an assertion of its religious identity, the cultural essence and features of Bengalis continued to prevail. Indeed deletion of the 'secular' component of the Constitution of Bangladesh soon after Mujib's death by the subsequent military leaders did not necessarily obliterate the original Bangladeshi identity embedded in its cultural roots. The religious and cultural identity actually runs parallel in the lives of Bangladeshis. This is very evident in the day-to-day activities. Secular occasions like Rabindranath Tagore's anniversary, Nazrul Islam's birthday, Bengali New Year's Day and even the language movement are celebrated with much fervour even today. The cultural character of Bangladeshis has not been subsumed by the reinforcement of its religious identity. The strength of this identity certainly is evident given the number of attacks by religious bigots against such events.

One could trace this non-conservative and non-stereotyped Islamic ways of Bangladeshis to the influence of Sufis and Islamic preachers who spread the religion by adapting it to local cultural customs. This tradition is reflected in the attempts of both society and democratic polity to broadening of the narrow interpretation of religious codes. Since 1972, the *Quomi* or state owned madrassas have made Bengali a compulsory subject up to the secondary level (*Marhala-i-Sanvia*). Given the array of diverse subjects taught at present, a large number of university teachers are beneficiaries of this education system.⁴⁰ Not only are the madrassas encouraged to enrol girl students but women teachers are especially encouraged to teach in these schools, which provide for the bulk of primary level education.

Contrary to the experiences of other Islamic countries, Bangladesh has managed to control its population growth through teachings imparted at these madrassas. The internal constituency for fundamentalism is rather limited in Bangladesh. Popular indifference, for example, compelled religious leaders to revoke their earlier ruling banning foreign television channels, which were supposed to have divergent negative influences on Islamic culture. The difficulty with which Golam Azan, leader of *Jamaa't*, eventually secured Bangladeshi citizenship reflects the strong resentment against anti-liberation forces. Likewise, the change of *Jama'at* leadership in 2000 evoked strong protests and resentment in Bangladesh. Demands were made that Motiur Rahman Nizami, who succeeded Golam Azan, should be tried for war crimes over his role during the liberation war.

The part played by civil society should also be recalled in this context. It was the conscious civil society which freed Bangladesh from military dictatorship and ushered in a democracy that is somewhat unique to an Islamic republic. Even now when extreme Islamic fervour is on the rise, as in the case of the agitation against the Ahmadiyas, it is civil society that is at the forefront of the struggle. Despite many attempts by the state to control the press, civil society has been able to maintain a certain degree of independence and wrestle with the systemic controls that are often attempted to be imposed.

Various non-governmental organisations like the Grameen Bank, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), *Proshikha* and similar other societies have played a larger role in the emancipation of Bangladeshi women especially in rural areas. Bangladeshi women despite their Islamic identity cannot be typified as those being 'behind the veil' but form a large part of the labour force. In fact, the readymade garment industry, the largest source of foreign exchange earning, employs women on a large scale.

While at one level there is an endeavour by vested interests to make the polity more rigid and conservative, the presence of a conscious civil society and the overall cultural character of the state, to a large extent moderates and balances the ongoing struggle with the religious extremists.

Conclusion

The genocidal violence by the Pakistani army, the consequent liberation struggle and the war of independence that marked the birth of the nation in 1971 has become a major and at times inseparable component of Bangladeshi politics. The political culture that was shaped within East Pakistan sowed seeds of repression, political turmoil and preference for violent protests. This continued after independence under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's increasingly authoritarian rule. The series of military coups following his assassination consolidated the use of force as a means of bringing about internal changes, thereby aggravating the problems. The entry of the military into the political arena also intensified violence against the Chakma minorities. Indeed, it was popular agitation often accompanied by street protests and political violence that resulted in the advent of multi-party democracy in 1991. The introduction of democracy, however, did not result in the reduction of violence.

Besides political intolerance and prolonged military rule, the rise of Islamic extremism is a third factor that has contributed to the growth of violence in Bangladesh in recent years. Since the mid-1970s, Bangladeshis have become increasingly religious because of the shift in ideologies and regression in secular values. Even secular forces such as the Awami League have been compelled to adjust their stances in tune with the new ground realities. Following Begum Khaleda's electoral victory in October 2001, a number of violent attacks on well known individuals and terrorist bombings have been directly or indirectly linked to Islamic extremism. The tolerant attitude of the government and the benevolent postures of the *Jama'at* towards the activities of various international terrorist groups in Bangladesh do not portend well for stability, tolerance and peace in the society and polity of this key South Asian state.

Appendix -1

Bomb Blasts in Bangladesh, 1999-2005

Date	Place	Killed	Injured
May 14, 2005	Bagerhat	NA	NA
February 16, 2005	Sirajganj	NA	NA
February 13 and 16, 2005	BRAC offices, Joypurhat & Naogoa -		6
February 5, 2005	Press Club, Khulna	1	3
January 27, 2005	Boidder Bazar, Habiganj	5	NA
January 12, 2005	Jamalpur and Sherpur Districts	-	35
August 21, 2004	Bangabandhu A venue, Dhaka	19	200
May 21, 2004	Hazrat Shahjalal shrine, Sylhet	3	100
January 12, 2004	Hazrat Shahjalal shrine, Sylhet	5	50
March 1, 2003	International Trade Fair, Khulna	1	10
January 17, 2003	Dariapur village, Tangail district	8	8
December 7, 2002	Mymensingh	18	300
October 13, 2002	Khulna	0	1

October 11, 2002	Rangmati town	3	2
September 28, 2002	Sathkhira town	3	125
May 1, 2002	Gurdaspur upzila (sub-district), Natore	1	25
April 25, 2002	Dhaka	0	2
April 10, 2002	Kushtia	0	0
February 27, 2002	Dhandoba , Barisal district	1	1
February 4, 2002	Chittagong Press Club	1	3
January 5, 2002	Barisal	0	2
January 20, 2001	Dhaka	6	50
January 10, 2001	Dhaka	7	Unspecified
October 14, 2001	Sirajganj	0	2
September 25, 2001	Sylhet town	2	0
September 24, 2001	Awami League rally, Bagerhat district	8	100
September 25, 2001	Shullah, Sunamganj district	4	0
September 3, 2001	Makahati Bazar, Munshiganj	0	13
August 25, 2001	Feni town	0	7
June 15, 2001	Awami League office, Narayanganj town	22	100
June 3, 2001	Baniyachar Catholic Church, Gopalganj district	10	25
April 17, 2001	Rajshahi district	1	0
April 14, 2001	Dhaka	10	Unspecified
December 25, 2000	Dhaka	0	0
December 24, 2000	Dhaka	2	18
November 21, 2000	Dhaka	0	4
October 8, 1999	Ahmadiya mosque, Khulna	8	40
March 7, 1999	Jessore district	10	

Source: Compiled from South Asia Terrorism Portal
<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/in>

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