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On the borderlines: Politics, religion and violence in Bangladesh

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The borders of new states represent sites of contention on two different levels: physical and intellectual. The physical border challenges the government of the state to extend its authority and meet its obligations to citizens within the territory which it encapsulates; to match its "juridical" authority with "empirical authority" and fulfil the criteria for independent statehood.[1] Moreover, governments are charged with its protection and ensuring that it is not breached by illicit movements of people or goods. On the intellectual level, borders present a need for the creation of a national identity that justifies political independence, the very *raison d'être* of the borders. This involves the creation of a national narrative and posits choices regarding the nature of the new state and its institutional structure, as well as political mechanisms for managing the state-society relationship. The physicality of the new boundary and its intellectual basis also force new social and political decisions. Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" becomes all too real as those living in the border areas or enclaves on either side of the political boundary are forced by the appearance of a barrier to identify themselves with a national enterprise and relinquish bonds of community shared with those across a political boundary.[2]

Weaknesses in addressing the physical challenges, including poor governance, service delivery and security oversight, as well as unresolved questions on the intellectual level regarding a national narrative and identity, have created a basis for political violence in Bangladesh. Since achieving independence from Pakistan in 1971, questions of state

structure, political ideology and the role of religion have been fiercely debated among Bangladeshis. They have contributed to a confrontational relationship between key political actors whose differing views on issues of institutional structures and ideology have often been expressed through acts along the spectrum of political violence, including street agitations and strikes (*hartals*), violent protests, assassinations, bombs and the intimidation of political opponents by armed groups or *mastaans*. Incidents of terrorism, or attacks on civilians deliberately inflicted to generate widespread fear in the hope of effecting political change, though relatively new in Bangladesh, may also be seen as the extreme end of this spectrum.

This essay takes as its point of departure the installation of democratic government in Bangladesh in 1991. It will examine the role of both types of challenges – physical and intellectual – to Bangladesh as a state and an idea, and how conflicts about these have contributed to a confrontational political culture in which the use of violence has been normalized to express political differences. The first challenge examined is the search for a national identity, and how this has generated a strongly emotive nationalist narrative to underscore the *raison d'être* for the political borders of 1971. However, unresolved questions relating to state authority and national identity continue to fuel a confrontational political culture, which will be examined in the following section. Though this discourse has been largely secular, the increasing salience of religion in public and political life in Bangladesh poses a challenge to both the ideological and the physical legitimacy of the state and its borders, which will be examined in the third section. The fourth section explores the role of regional dynamics and how their engagement poses challenges to the Bangladeshi border that contribute to the persistence of political violence in the country.

Research for this study was undertaken through a series of field trips to Bangladesh, the United Kingdom and within the United States which elicited numerous interviews with academics, key policy-makers, representatives of the government and civil society and experts on and from the region, over the course of a year and half. An extensive review of the relevant literature also informed the substance of the chapter, as did the author's professional engagement in researching multilateral responses to security issues.

The evolution of modern Bangladesh and the search for a national identity

A conversation with the director of a folk-art foundation established by Bangladeshi artist Zainul Abedin elicited the following explanation for

its establishment: Abedin believed that since Bangladesh had achieved its independent political identity in 1971, it should make every attempt to preserve the cultural traditions that underpinned this desire for independence.[3] However, not everyone agrees on what the identity of the new nation and its citizens ought to be, with some favouring a secular nationalist one while others wish to retain Islam as a prominent element. Both facets were important in underscoring the desire for independence. However, the unresolved nature of the question has fuelled the confrontational rhetoric of key political actors and proved a continuing basis for much political violence in the country.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 and then the partition of India in 1947, followed by the violence which accompanied the emergence of Bangladesh in place of East Pakistan, have lent its borders great emotive significance and engendered a strong and widespread sense of nationalism.[4] As the only state in South Asia whose independence was achieved through a successful struggle based on an ethno-linguistic identity, Bangladesh is unique. Indeed, the majority of the Bengal borderland is a completely new international border and does not follow any prior demarcations. The relative ethnic and religious homogeneity of Bangladesh, with nearly 85 per cent of its population of approximately 140 million people being Muslim, has allowed its citizens to relate themselves more readily to a "nation" and Bangladesh as a nation-state. Yet, as Sofia Uddin points out, nationalism requires pageantry and symbolism, and traditions that create an inalienable bond between the land and the people; a legitimation of a people's claim to territory and status as a nation-state. Flags, national anthems, narratives of war and victory, collective loss and rebirth as an independent nation – these are all accessories to complement political independence, and in Bangladesh they reflect a sense of pride in the culture and heritage of *Sonar Bangla*, or "Golden Bengal".[5]

As a result of this history, Bangladesh's national identity emerged in opposition to the Islamic identity of Pakistan and the Hindu identity of West Bengal. This Bangladeshi (as opposed to *Bengali*) identity is based on what Ali Riaz has called "confessional territoriality" – that is, based on the territorial boundaries of the new state, Bengali culture and Islam.[6] Moreover, as Iftekhar Chowdhury has observed:

> After experience had indicated a distinct set of interests for Bengali Muslims, their basic strategy in countering threat perceptions from one community was to seek an alliance with the other. The perceived threats were seen to be to one or the other of their attributes – to their *Bengaliness* or to their *Muslimness*.[7]

Each of these attributes is associated with one of the two dominant political parties. The left-of-centre Awami League (AL) was led by

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a charismatic man credited as being the found-ing leader of the state and affectionately called *Bangabandhu*, "friend of Bengal". Under his leadership, the fundamental principles guiding the new state were to be secularism, nationalism, democracy and socialism.[8] Scarred by the violence which accompanied the partitions of 1947 and 1971, secularism was seen as a means of erasing communal boundaries and creating a space accommodative of the Muslim majority as well as the significant Hindu minority, Christians, Buddhists and tribal commu-nities. He was assassinated alongside his whole family, other than two daughters who were abroad at the time, at his residence in August 1975. Since 1981 the Awami League has been led by his daughter Sheikh Hasina, and continues to be associated with the principle of secular na-tionalism and a favourable disposition towards diverse ethnic groups – what is perceived as a "pro-liberation" stance.

   The right-of-centre Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was founded by Ziaur Rahman, a decorated war hero who remains revered for his bravery in 1971 and his role in leading Bangladesh to independence. He served as president from 1977 until his assassination in 1981. Influenced by Cold War politics which led to Western suspicion of socialist India, as well as the need to engage with Islamic countries unhappy at the dis-memberment of Pakistan, President Zia propagated a more religious brand of nationalism, emphasizing an Islamic identity making Bangla-desh distinct from West Bengal and India.[9] Under his leadership, "*Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*" (In the name of Allah, the most Benefi-cent, the Merciful) was inserted into the preamble of the constitution and the principle of secularism was replaced with "absolute faith and trust in the Almighty Allah". Furthermore, socialism was redefined as economic and social justice.[10] This top-down process was continued by the govern-ment of General Ershad, which declared Islam to be the state religion in 1988 and sought to establish a "mosque-centred" society.[11] Supporters of the BNP are associated more with a religious Muslim perspective which some have considered "anti-liberation" and opposed to the evolution of the Bangladeshi state, a sentiment that has been heightened by the BNP's association with religious parties believed to have actively opposed Bang-ladeshi nationalism and independence.

   Jamaat-e-Islami remains the country's most influential religious party.[12] Its carefully worded objectives call for an Islamic state, to be achieved through a democratic process in which a more religiously observant soci-ety will vote them into power. However, its reputation in Bangladesh has been coloured by its pro-Pakistani stance in 1971 and accusations of col-laboration and war crimes perpetrated against pro-Bangladesh activists and intellectuals. Consequently, in a bid to gain public legitimacy, Jamaat has focused on providing much-needed social services and medical care

to build up its popular base, adopting a strategy similar to that success-
fully pursued by Hamas and Hezbollah in developing a broad base of
support among the downtrodden. This has been possible through impres-
sive organization supported by well-organized funding: membership dues,
investment in the private sector and external funding. "Jamaat has not
pressed an Islamic agenda too overtly, but its ministers have acquired a
reputation for being competent and incorrupt, which would serve it well
if disillusionment with the major parties spreads."[13] In the 2001–2006
BNP-led government it played a crucial "kingmaker" role in giving the
government the necessary parliamentary majority, and held two ministe-
rial portfolios, agriculture and social welfare, which allowed it to develop
a strong relationship with rural constituents. Yet despite 30 years of ac-
tive political organization, it has never been able to win more than 17
seats in the 300-member Jatiya Sangsad (parliament), and in the most re-
cent election lost all but two parliamentary seats, including those of its
senior members.

The relationship of each party to the history of independence and, con-
sequently, the borders of the new state continues to fuel deep-seated dif-
ferences among their respective supporters. For those who recall 1971
and were closely involved in the events leading up to independence, the
ferocity of Pakistan's attempts to keep the state together belied the bond
of religious unity. Bangladeshis who recall the struggles of the language
movement in the 1950s and the perceived abandonment of the eastern
front during the 1965 war with India recall the desire for independence,
juridical and empirical. Policies of the central government in Pakistan
which left the more populous eastern wing under-resourced and under-
protected (particularly during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965) and Paki-
stani declarations suggesting that the syncretic religious practices in the
east were "un-Islamic" left Bengalis smarting. Recent traditions, nation-
alist symbolism and rituals, such as the 21 February *Ekushey* commemo-
rations of those who died for the recognition of Bengali as a national
language in Pakistan, are vital parts of transferring these values to later
generations, and consequently reasserting the border each time they are
upheld. For those in Bangladesh who believe in a stronger religious iden-
tity for the state and its citizens, these very symbols of nationalism
present a dilution of this ideal and the prospect for unity with co-
religionists in other countries, whether spiritual or political.

However, for many young Bangladeshis, especially those living abroad
among the diaspora, 1971 and independence are distant memories. New
borders and communities are formed as religion provides a more com-
mon denominator among different ethnic and national groups in the new
country, threatening to supersede the common bonds of ethno-linguistic
heritage or territoriality which informed a more secular nationalism. In

the quest for assimilation in the new country, *bidesh*, notions of *desh* or "home", are left behind more easily than religion.[14]

The politics of violence

Though Bangladesh achieved its territorial and political sovereignty nearly four decades ago, it has made unsteady progress in consolidating democratic institutions. As Rounaq Jahan has pointed out, politicians have increasingly become autocratic in behaviour; key institutions like the civil administration and judiciary have become politicized and lost their autonomy. The rule of law and both horizontal and vertical account-ability have eroded.[15]

These failures have contributed to the creation of a permissive envir-onment for the emergence of violent political actors, ideological and re-ligious militant groups and civil unrest. Consequently, non-state actors, as well as those believed to be patronized by factions within ruling govern-ments, have been able to contest the legitimacy of the state or govern-ment and threaten its physical integrity through acts of violence. As Edward Newman has argued, while weak states may provide an enabling environment for the emergence of violent political actors, or certain types of terrorist groups, additional variables like support from local actors need to be identified.[16] In Bangladesh, the political parties and their sup-porters are widely believed to support – either explicitly or implicitly – violent actors who serve the purpose of intimidating opponents or consolidating political support. Though noteworthy progress has been made in Bangladesh on a number of development indicators through initiatives such as micro-credit programmes, non-formal education for women and stipends to promote secondary school attendance and family planning programmes, the persistence of violence continues to constrain the ability of Bangladeshis to pursue development in a safe and secure environment with a responsive and accountable government. As a result, it is also unsurprising that where the use of violence in *competing* for state power has been widely condoned, groups *contesting* the state and its power have also adopted violent means.

Although the BNP and the AL have alternated periods in power through four elections since 1991, none has been without controversy or allegations of vote rigging by the losing party. Both parties have rigor-ously made use of parliamentary boycotts and general strikes in order to protest the actions of the ruling party. In 2001, for example, the BNP and its coalition allies boycotted parliament despite appeals from the Speaker to attend sessions dedicated to two important questions of government. Following the landslide electoral victory of the BNP in 2001, the Awami

League boycotted parliament, alleging a rigged election, and though it returned to serve as the opposition, again boycotted parliament in 2003–2004. Perceiving no role for a "loyal opposition" in the parliament, political disagreements in Bangladesh were expressed through walkouts from parliament or *hartals* (general strikes) which more than often resulted in an economic and social standstill the country could ill afford, in particular small businesses and those earning daily wages.[17] Indeed, a recent UN study found both parties nearly equal in their calls for *hartals*, though it also noted that the public were now less convinced of their effectiveness.[18] Consequently, politics has developed into a "winner-take-all" system with little or no role for the opposition, and the essential tools of political discourse – debate and dialogue – were replaced by confrontational tactics.

With the stakes of electoral victory high, political parties have resorted to the use of money and muscle in their campaigns. As van Schendel notes, the *mastaan*, or armed criminal, has gained prominence as an intermediary between the worlds of criminality and politics, and been used to further political campaigns and messages.[19] Notable Bangladeshi academic and economist Rehman Sobhan observed:

> The patronage extended by a political party to *mastaans* or hoodlums derives from the dependence of many political figures on these forces to ensure their election and the retention of their political authority in their constituency area. Many politicians now increasingly use *mastaans* as a political resource in the contention for political office and state patronage to access public resources. The resultant nexus between politicians, business, the *mastaans* and law enforcement agencies is now embedded into the social structure of Bangladesh.[20]

Reports of intimidation and violence against minorities and political opponents introduce the notion of violence as an increasingly "normal" political tactic and means of resolving conflictual ideologies. This is reflected in the violence associated with student politics in Bangladesh, where the activities of student wings of the major political parties often bring the pursuit of academic progress to a grinding halt. Political opportunism and the interpretation of politics as a zero-sum game have shaped events at institutions of higher education. Though student political activism is itself commendable, the adoption of violent confrontational tactics by the student wings of dominant political parties, including the Islami Chattra Shibbir representing Jamaat, has contributed to the politicization of academics and created an intimidating environment for many teachers and students on university campuses. It is also important as student political leaders often go on to have prominent roles in politics on a national level; and it has compromised not only the security of

Bangladeshis but the quality of education and religious interpretation available to students. Imtiaz Ahmed observed that:

> Militancy and extremism, after all, are first and foremost intellectual exercises, which only later express themselves through violence. However, the complicity of the state, particularly the activities of some of the actors and agencies within the government, cannot be ruled out in the birth of "academic-extremists".[21]

The rise of religious rhetoric in violence

Send in the jihadists

In recent years, concerns about political violence, *mastaans* and *hartals* have been paralleled – at times even eclipsed – by the emergence of militant groups espousing violent religious extremism. Groups like the Harkatul Jihad Al Islami (HuJI), associated with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, as well as Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB) emerged in the mid-1990s following the return of fighters to Bangladesh after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.[22] They questioned the legitimacy of the secular government, declared their opposition to democratic political processes and proposed a violent transformation of Bangladesh into their interpretation of an Islamic state. The objectives of these new groups call for the establishment of an Islamic state and the imposition of *Shari'a* law. Unlike Jamaat, they reject the democratic political system as a means of achieving this. As such, they challenge the legitimacy of the state and the nationalism which gave rise to its independence. A web posting purportedly by the JMB and recently cited by the Council on Foreign Relations declared:

> We are inviting all the concerns of Bangladesh to abstain [from] the so called election system and also inviting to conduct the country under the rule of Allah because the constitution of Bangladesh directly contradicts with the Holy Quran and Sahih Hadith. This is the reason, Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, is committed to establish the rule of Allah in this country under the system of *Qital*.[23]

These groups – in particular the JMB and JMJB – are believed to be responsible for a number of attacks on cultural events and the judiciary, and a series of nearly 400 bomb blasts in all but one district of Bangladesh in August 2005. The HuJI has been blamed for an attack on the British high commissioner in May 2004, while the JMB and its associates

have been held responsible for an attempt on the life of Sheikh Hasina at a rally in 2004, which critically injured many, including senior AL party leaders, one of whom died from her injuries.[24]

Bomb blasts and protests against Bengali cultural events, artistic traditions and representatives of the secular government signify a rejection of nationalist values and the state as a legitimate political entity. The physicality of the explosions and protests moves beyond an intellectual exercise in opposition and threatens the physical integrity of the state and one of the foremost responsibilities of a modern government, the protection of its territory and people. Groups like the HuJI, JMB and JMJB have been associated with al-Qaeda, whose objectives are more universalist in seeking to revive an Islamic caliphate that will unite the Muslim *umma*, or community, irrespective of political boundaries. However, to date their actions have focused on attempts to effect political change within Bangladesh. Widely circulated reports of government patronage for such groups, particularly when Jamaat was present in the BNP-led government of 2001–2006, have underscored the normalization of violence as a mode of consolidating power and effecting political change. It thus comes as little surprise that groups expressing wholesale opposition to the state and its political leadership should also adopt these same violent methods of political expression.

Borders imagined

The rejection by militant groups of the secular state warrants an exploration of the alternatives proposed. Many of these remain in the realm of the ideal and in highly subjective interpretations of history; they include imagined communities of faith which fail to acknowledge sectarian or ethno-cultural differences even within the Muslim *umma* itself. They have often been imagined in opposition to the "other", whether symbolized by Hindu India or the Christian "West", or, for diaspora populations, imagined notions of the homeland their parents or grandparents left behind, rather than their contemporary environment. This latter group are especially important as they relay both ideas and resources across political borders back into Bangladesh from places like the United Kingdom, the Middle East and Southeast Asia; such ideas, often more radical than those found within Bangladesh itself, are imported back from those abroad deemed a social or financial success.

Sayid Qutb, whose writings influenced the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and continue to shape the ideas of many Islamists today, rejected the notion of nationalism as a remnant of *jahiliyya*, or the time of ignorance before the Prophet Muhammad conveyed the teachings of Islam.[25] Moreover, nationalism contravened ideas regarding the

indivisibility of the *umma*; *fitna*, or divisions among the faithful, are also proscribed by Islam. These ideas were reflected in Jamaat's support for the indivisibility of Pakistan and rejection of the nationalist enterprise in Bangladesh.

To note the recent rise in religiosity or religious sentiment in public life is not to say that religion has been historically absent from the region. Yet in Bangladesh, Islamic practices have long reflected a moderate and inclusive system of belief and practice inspired by the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and Sufi practice. Bengali culture has been enriched by the interplay of numerous civilizational and religious influences, and contemporary social practices are strongly rooted in the multicultural history of the region. Monuments and history reflect the rotation of power between Hindu, Muslim and, at times, Buddhist rulers.[26] The "secularism" which Sheikh Mujib promoted in 1972 was in fact reflective of this tradition and its translation into Bengali as *dharma nirapekshata*, which literally translates to "religious neutrality".[27]

> Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. Hindus will observe their religion; Muslims will observe their own; Christians and Buddhists will observe their religions . . . religion cannot be used for political ends.[28]

However, by the early nineteenth century the more orthodox teachings of the Deobandi school and the Wahabbi movement had reached Bengal and introduced a more fundamentalist Islam espoused by the Faraizi movement. Furthermore, it introduced the idea of Mecca, or the Arab world, as the locus of authentic Islam in place of religious practices informed by Bengali culture. Bangladesh has not been immune to the influx of contemporary "petrodollars" from the Middle East and the development of a transnational ideology of "militant *jihad*" further fuelled by geopolitical events. Reports indicate that vigilante militant groups have taken over law-and-order functions in rural pockets, holding village religious courts known as *salish* and issuing legal judgments or *fatwas* along with punishments not sanctioned by the state.[29] However, one academic commented that the surge of religious orthodoxy may be ascribed to "the growing pains of modernity; a reaction against [Bangladesh's] own progress" and a response by local authorities to challenges mounted against local power structures.[30]

In Bangladesh, the ascendancy of Mecca as a locus of influence has been supported by migration and the movement of people and ideas across borders. Remittances of funds and observations of "authentic" Islamic practices in the Middle East shape the religious organizations, charities and education in the home country. In place of the Islam practised in Bengal, informed by regional languages, practices and traditions

and based on Hanafi and Sufi thought, groups like the JMB and HuJI would impose the more conservative and rigid mores promoted by the Wahabbi school of Islamic thought. Furthermore, their articulation of the ideal religious community has a regional dimension as it rejects modern political borders. The ideal Islamic state they call for is a path towards the unification of the *umma* and therefore challenges the notion of modern political borders. For example, Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Bangladesh argues:

> So it is not permitted for the Ummah to only be unified upon her belief while remaining divided politically: as the Prophet ordered his companions to give their allegiance to the Khulafa one after another, and that if two leaders were given allegiance at any one time then the latter should be killed.

> The call for the Khilafah is the call for the protection of the Ummah. It is the call for the implementation of Islam based upon political unity in order this Ummah can take its place as witnesses upon mankind. If the Ummah was united under the banner of Islam, the believers would be able to strengthen one another, rather than being like the froth on the sea. The combined land mass, resources and manpower of the Muslims from Pakistan to Egypt to Turkey would be used in order to make the word of Allah and His Messenger most high, rather than used against the Ummah to support the enemies of Allah and His *deen* . . .[31]

However, it is noteworthy that these declarations fail to expound on details regarding the administration of such a state, or how such a caliphate would coexist with the geopolitical realities of the modern world and engage in international affairs. There are no references or manifestos that address how such a state would manage the administration of the state and its bureaucracy, how it would implement service delivery for its citizens or engage in international affairs and trade. Furthermore, though the rhetoric of militant religious groups recalls the "golden age" of Islam, as exemplified by the Abbasid period, none references the importance of the state patronage for the sciences and arts that facilitated the intellectual developments underpinning this period.

In a nation whose citizens are both religiously devout and democratically inclined, there exists a complex dynamic that cautions against the assumption that religiosity is synonymous with support for terrorism or violent extremism. Although the people in Bangladesh may be religious in their personal sphere, there were few large-scale demonstrations in the wake of, for example, the Danish cartoon crisis or the elections in Gujarat, in contrast to what might have been expected, and the spate of bombings in 2005 elicited widespread disapprobation. Reports of violence against minorities have often prompted vocal activism by civil

society groups, and the rituals and festivals of multiple religions, including Durga Puja, continue to be celebrated in Bangladesh.

However, one long-time observer told this author that he believes Bangladesh *has* undergone a worrisome change and has become a "rougher, tougher, place".[32] Among concerns cited by analysts and observers is the increased incidence of Islamic dress mirroring that worn in the Middle East, such as the *burqa* or *hijab*, rather than that indigenous to Bengal, such as the sari for women and *lungi* for men. More alarmingly, the violent protests against equal inheritance rights for women mounted by the Islami Okiya Jote, an Islamist party and a junior coalition member in the 2001–2006 BNP government, and reports of women being punished by village elders for perceived transgressions against Islamic law indicate the potential for violence of such transformations.

Nonetheless, the 2008 elections in Bangladesh and the Awami League's landslide victory reflected an overwhelming reaffirmation by Bangladeshi citizens of a national identity based on a secular and accommodative brand of nationalism.[33] Furthermore, Bangladesh possesses a number of strong – or potentially strong – counter-forces to this threat.[34] Its people have overwhelmingly expressed their preference for democratic and pluralist government despite several periods of autocratic rule. In developing its own unique responses to political challenges, such as the caretaker government system to oversee elections and adapting its systems of government when necessary, Bangladesh has shown a capacity for state renovation which defies predictions of state failure. Innovative NGOs like BRAC and Grameen, civil society groups and the media in Bangladesh have pushed a quiet revolution promoting women's rights, development and education. Nationalism and the memory of 1971 serve as a potent check on religious politics. Through elections and popular movements, Bangladeshis have shown themselves to have little tolerance for mass violence in the name of religion, though they may be personally pious.[35]

Opposing "the other"

This idealized Islamic community which militant groups in Bangladesh have advocated has also been imagined in opposition to the "other". Values associated with the "Christian West",[36] such as democracy, freedom of speech, the empowerment of women and religious freedom, have met with virulent protest among Islamists, some violent and some peaceful, notwithstanding that many of these values underscored anti-colonial movements in the region. Within South Asia, the "other" has largely been represented by "Hindu India", and several observers neglect the extent to which actions among the religious right are perceived as a threat to

Islam and therefore considered a *casus belli* for militant Islamist groups in the region.

However, within parts of India too, an ideal of religious purity shapes perceptions and engagements with others. For example, the espousal of Hindutva by militant Hindu groups and right-wing parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) reasserts the notion of a Hindu motherland as it is claimed to have existed prior to the Mughal ascendancy. Though this ideology is not intended to make an impact beyond the political borders of modern India, it reflects the desire for the re-establishment of a utopian existence, and the rhetoric of exclusion threatens the country's at times fragile inter-communal relationships. Exemplifying the ideology of such groups, their vision of a religiously exclusive community and their hostility to other groups, the BJP's website proclaims:

> Thus, the seeds of today's Hindu *Jagriti*, awakening, were created the very instance that an invader threatened the fabric of Hindu society which was religious tolerance. The vibrancy of Hindu society was noticeable at all times in that despite such barbarism from the Islamic hordes of central Asia and Turkey, Hindus never played with the same rules that Muslims did. The Communist and Muslim intelligentsia, led by Nehruvian ideologists who are never short of distorted history, have been unable to show that any Hindu ruler ever matched the cruelty of even a moderate Muslim ruler.[37]

Though the underlying causes of violence in South Asia are complex and multifaceted, as indicated in the discussion above and elsewhere in this volume, the quest for the development of a religiously exclusive community, protected from the "other" by a boundary, may be identified as a proximate cause for the tensions which create a permissive environment for violent extremism.

Within the Bangladeshi diaspora resides another set of imagined borders, those of a homeland left behind by parents and grandparents. For many Bangladeshi immigrants, however, the tensions between *Bengaliness* and *Muslimness* are less than those between them and the identity of their host country. As one representative from a cultural organization promoting the secular nationalist narrative of Bangladesh explained, "For a teenager in the UK, it is easier to find out about your Muslim identity than it is to learn about your Bangladeshi identity or history; there are few organizations about the culture and history of Bangladesh but it's always easy to walk into a mosque or Islamic centre."[38] Moreover, younger generations in Bangladesh and within the diaspora are less familiar with, and influenced by, the history of 1971; their perceptions are shaped by more recent conflicts in Kashmir, Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. Interpreted as an attack on Islam and the Muslim *umma* as

a whole, these conflicts have prompted widespread anger and forged a common bond among Muslims in geographically disparate locations who perceive themselves as commonly affected by the events. Advances in media technology and communications mean that attacks in one of these locations can be edited and disseminated broadly through video or internet footage, and analysts of *jihadist* communication on the internet have reiterated that such images have a powerful impact in drawing recruits to militant groups. Thus the political boundaries that divide actors dissolve even as they rush to protect a set of imagined, though perhaps no less emotive or salient, borders.

Unresolved questions regarding the national identity of the new Bangladeshi state, and consequently the rationale for the political border, also pose a challenge to its ability to accommodate a multiconfessional society. Orthodox religious groups may not pose a threat of violence to a state or its citizens. However, they pose a challenge to the many hard-won freedoms and achievements of the young state, to the legal framework of government, the role of women and minorities in public spaces, the nature of education and social dynamics, the space for pluralism and critical thinking in the public arena; threatening violence to the *state* if not its citizens. In short, widespread religious radicalization would challenge vital civil liberties and human rights associated with a modern democratic state. Maneeza Hossain, writing about increasing religious radicalization in the country, calls this trend "cultural radicalization" and argues that Islamists in Bangladesh have created a "fictionalized monolithic Islam".[39] Moreover, such radicalization challenges the legitimacy of a physical border that divides a religious community but also, on the intellectual level, the legitimacy of the political border and the nationalist entity in encapsulates; instead radicalized groups posit a basis for identity that rejects the value of the border on both levels.

Regional dimensions of political violence in Bangladesh

Sites of conflict

The potential of borders to generate disputes is not unique to the Indo-Bangladesh border. Throughout South Asia, unresolved questions of political demarcations reflect ongoing conflicts regarding identity and political authority. The borders in the region have been under regular challenge by regional conflicts and the incursion of external actors into the domestic politics of states. For example, there is widespread belief in Bangladesh that the Indian intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), has been active in fomenting unrest in the Chittagong

Hill Tracts, and that Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) has provided active support to Islamists and militant groups.[40] In Kashmir, for example, the undecided question of political allegiance and the reluctance of either India or Pakistan to relinquish territory – and the vision it exemplifies, either of a secular union or a homeland for South Asian Muslims – have perpetuated six decades of conflict and at least three wars. This has, however, degenerated into an asymmetric conflict no longer carried out by armies but by proxies, mercenaries and ideologues, as well as regular military forces. The Afghan-Pakistan border remains unrecognized by those who still see a possible "Pashtunistan", so rudely interrupted by the British in search of empire and victory in the "Great Game". Conflicts over borders – the desire for them and consequently independent nation-states and political identities as well as a rebellion against them and what they embody – have also been ongoing in Sri Lanka, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and Assam in India.

Do these conflicts pose an insurmountable challenge to the development of a regional identity or a more cohesive "Southasia"? Is it possible that these borders, so jealously guarded and reinforced through the development of national symbols, imagery and histories, may one day give way to a new identity?

The creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), first proposed by Bangladesh under President Zia, speaks to this possibility. However, its efficacy remains hampered by the state of hostility and mutual suspicion between India and Pakistan.[41] Indeed, these tensions have served to reassert national identities and generated decades of conflict, including at least three wars. Nonetheless, post–Cold War Europe witnessed changes unimaginable in their speed and decisive rejection of a nearly five-decade-long history of division; could South Asia ever follow suit? Ayesha Jalal challenged the divisive power of the post-colonial nation-states in South Asia, arguing that, in a brutal irony, the inhabitants of South Asia "earned the trappings of citizenship by further constraining their freedom to develop historically evolved multiple identities". In place of the nation-state and its strong central administration, she has argued for "layered sovereignties" and "de-centered democracies" accommodative of the multiple identities of the region's inhabitants.[42] Nitish Sengupta, writing on the partition of Bengal beginning in 1905, goes further in imagining a "loose confederation between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan".[43]

Borders interrupted

The above discussion has dealt primarily with the intellectual questions regarding national identity arising from the establishment of borders –

that is, statehood. However the physicality of the borders may also be challenged by those for whom they pose a division to a historical community. Kinship ties in South Asia cross political borders, and shared rituals and social mores create a familiar language of behaviour and practices drawing the region together; in many places they challenge the rationality or viability of physical divisions. The post-colonial partitions of the subcontinent, which may have otherwise had little impact, meant that outlying villages and towns on the borderlands found themselves suddenly on the wrong side of familiar homes of friends and family, marketplaces and the routines which had shaped their existence for preceding decades.

An even more extreme form of political division is highlighted by the existence of "enclaves" or islands of sovereignty in a foreign land across the border. Van Schendel describes the schizophrenic identities emerging in these spaces, where inhabitants might identify themselves with the state of which their enclave is a part, through "proxy citizenship" in the surrounding state or, in many cases, none at all. However, he points out that when both these prove untenable in times of violence and movement, inhabitants of the enclaves develop an identity and culture indigenous to the enclave itself, though it is both "problematic" and "unstable".[44] Thus it is not only the physicality of the border being challenged by the need of these citizens to traverse it in the course of their daily lives, but also the national identity which the sovereign spaces the border encompasses is supposed to generate. Cut off from the rituals and symbols designed to reaffirm a sense of belonging and nationalism, van Schendel points out that "[i]n the enclaves, the absence of the state is mirrored by the absence of nationalism".[45]

Bangladesh's strategic position, on major routes between Southeast Asia and the troubled regions of Central and West Asia, makes it an ideal transit route for the illicit movements of goods, people and services. Reports suggest that its ports have been used as entry points by al-Qaeda members seeking a safe haven following 11 September, and some experts believe that members of Jamaat-e-Islami, perpetrators of the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005, have sought transit through Bangladesh.[46] The reported movement of narcotics, small arms and contraband also highlights the challenge posed by the borders to the central government, of extending its writ to the territorial limits of the state and of defending its borders against a wary and suspicious neighbour. The limited presence of political and law-enforcement agents has transformed many border areas into what van Schendel described as "transnational nexuses of illegality". However, van Schendel and Itty Abraham further note that these patterns of movement pre-date the emergence of the state and the label of "illicit" is generated more by the counterpoint it poses to the state, assumed to have a monopoly on the licit.[47]

Borders often emerge as a tangible manifestation of new political identities, hard won through negotiation, violence or political turmoil. In postcolonial South Asia these have been especially guarded as states continue to negotiate their boundaries, identities and relationships. Hard-won independence has been jealously guarded at borders which remain intensely securitized and politically "high". As the political descendant of the lines dividing India and Pakistan, the embodiment of the "two-nation theory" which consequently erected formidable barriers between the subcontinent's inhabitants, the Indo-Bangladeshi border bears the scars of its Indo-Pakistani forerunner. The tension is especially explicit in northeast India, where the movement of Bangladeshi migrants in search of economic opportunity or familial reunion has led to violent confrontations with local inhabitants, Bodos, who have also targeted Muslim inhabitants on the assumption of their "foreign" Bangladeshi status. This case exemplifies both physical and intellectual challenges to the border, as many Muslim settlers argue they came to the region prior to Bangladesh's independence and legally obtained Indian citizenship, though they are still treated by the indigenous communities as illegal infiltrators.[48]

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to point out that the borders of Bangladesh remain contested sites and face challenges that are both intellectual and physical. Their legitimacy and purpose are challenged by the movement of people and goods, and also within the state they encompass. They raise questions about the identity of those living within it, and their relationship to the borders and the people beyond them. In Bangladesh this is exemplified by the debates over national identity: whether it can accommodate multiculturalism or whether it is defined by a specific religion and territorial assignment. These debates are reflected in the positions taken by political parties, and the deterioration of governance and political discourse exacerbates tensions arising from differences on these issues. The admission of violence as a political tool by parties and their supporters in the contest over state power has created a permissive environment for the use of violence by groups *competing* for state power as well as those *contesting* the state and the legitimacy of the government.

The case of Bangladesh demonstrates that the border has the potential to serve as a great unifier, a cherished prize in the struggle for political independence, or an instigator of conflict for those still debating the consequences of victory. Furthermore, it illustrates the violence and conflict that accompany the centralizing forces of nation- and state-building, as nationalism constructed a monolithic and homogeneous identity for

citizens to supersede all other identities and marginalize "the other".[49] Nonetheless, predicted by Henry Kissinger to become an "international basket case" at its inception, Bangladesh and its people have shown a remarkable resilience in the face of overwhelming obstacles and a capacity for state renovation in the quest for better governance. The state is still sufficiently young, and its recent course of renewing and renovating its institutions of governance suggests it still has an opportunity to address the structural conditions and replace the politics of extremism with a mature and multifaceted identity able to manage the violence arising from the negotiations of boundaries.

Notes

1. Jackson, R. H. (1987) "Quasi-States, Dual Regimes and Neo-Classical Theory: International Jurisprudence and the Third World", *International Organization* 41(4), pp. 519–549. Jackson argued that juridical statehood, or recognition of political independence, was accorded to states as a norm which accompanied decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s but did not in many cases meet the criteria of statehood for *empirical* states, those which demonstrated among other things a strong central government and state bureaucracy.
2. In his seminal work, Anderson argued that a nation or community is socially constructed by those who imagine themselves to be part of a broader community or nation. "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest community will never know most of their fellow-members, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Anderson, Benedict ([1983] 1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, p. 6.
3. Interview, museum director, Sonargaon, Bangladesh, 2008.
4. Chowdhury, Iftekhar A. (2009) "The Roots of Bangladeshi National Identity: Their Impact on State Behavior", Working Paper No. 63, June, Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore.
5. Uddin, Sofia M. (2006) *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity and Language in an Islamic Nation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
6. Riaz, Ali (2004) *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
7. Chowdhury, note 4 above.
8. Though these were identified as four guiding principles for the new state in the constitution, it was later reworded so that secularism was defined as "with absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah" and socialism as "meaning economic and social justice".
9. It should also be noted that the relationship between the AL and the BNP was based on contradictory political ideologies, the former espousing the left and the latter the right, giving the BNP a more Western and capitalist orientation. Its stronger association with religious parties has really come about following the alliance with Jamaat in the 2001–2006 government.
10. Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, English translation, available at http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/asia/BD/Bangladesh%20Constitution%201972.pdf.
11. It was noted by some Bangladeshi interviewees that this was a top-down process and not a result of popular demand.

12. Subsequent to modifications to its constitution required by the Election Commission in 2008, such as acknowledging the 1971 war of liberation and allowing the membership of non-Muslims, it has officially been renamed Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islam.

13. Datta, Sreeradha (2007) "Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat From Within", *Journal of South Asian Studies* 30(1), p. 153.

14. In Bengali, *bidesh* means "abroad" while *desh* means "home country".

15. Jahan, Rounaq (2008) "The Challenges of Institutionalizing Democracy in Bangladesh", Working Paper No. 39, Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore.

16. Newman, Edward (2007) "Weak States, State Failure and Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19(4), pp. 463–488.

17. Hossain, Akhtar (2000) "Anatomy of Hartal Politics in Bangladesh", *Asian Survey* 40(3), pp. 508–529; Ganguly, Sumit (2006) "A New Challenge for Bangladesh", *Yale Global Online*, 30 March; BBC News (2006) "Bangladesh's Cycle of Strikes", June, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5075328.stm; BBC News (2006) "Strike Again Paralyses Bangladesh", November, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6168152.stm; BBC News (2006) "Bangladesh Strike Sparks Clashes", December, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6203328.stm; BBC News (2006) "Bangladesh Approaches Zero Hour", October, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5400784.stm.

18. UN Development Programme Bangladesh (2005) *Beyond Hartals: Towards Democratic Dialogue in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: UNDP.

19. Willem van Schendel describes them as mediating between the worlds of criminality and state. Van Schendel, Willem (2004) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond Nation and State in South Asia*. London: Anthem Press, p. 172.

20. Sobhan, Rehman (2004) "The Structural Dimensions of Malgovernance in Bangladesh", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 September.

21. He further argues that links between academicians and politics, business and religious extremists have contributed to the poor quality of religious interpretation in higher education institutions in Bangladesh and allowed for the replacement of a regionally informed Islam, reliant on the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, by a more orthodox Wahabbist strain from the Middle East. Ahmed, Imtiaz (2008) "Social Capital Amongst Extremist Mediocrity", *Himal Southasian*, September, available at www.himalmag.com/Social-capital-amidst-extremism-and-mediocrity_nw1946.html.

22. It should be noted that the exact relationships between these groups are unclear, with many citing overlaps of membership and ideology among them. For example, Anwar Ali of the *Daily Star* newspaper in Bangladesh reports that "The JMB is, however, learnt to be the youth front of the Al Mujahideen, the parent organisation that began working in the mid-1990s and still remains obscure." Furthermore, he states: "Jama'atul Jihad, Jama'atul Mujahideen, Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (Ahab), Ahle Hadith Jubo Shangha, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Harkatul Jihad, Hizbut Tawhid, Tawhidi Janata, Islami Jubo Shangha, Islami Shangha, Al Falah A'am Unnayan Shanstha and Shahadat-e al Hiqma are believed to be missions of the Al Mujahideen." See www.thedailystar.net/2005/08/19/d5081901033.htm. Additionally, though Jamaat denies any association with these groups, others believe that the JMB and JMJB draw inspiration from Jamaat, and that many of its senior leaders were members of Shibbir. John, Wilson (2008) "The Bengali Taliban", *Terrorism Monitor* 6(10), available at www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4926.

23. The CFR report on the August 2005 bombings may be found at www.cfr.org/publication/8767/bangladesh.html and the web posting it quotes is on www.jihadunspun.com/index-side_internal.php?article=103816&list=/home.php&.

24. The AL has been vocal in its accusations of BNP/Jamaat complicity in the August 2005 grenade attacks threatening the life of Sheikh Hasina. However, the JMB is also

believed to be responsible for the first suicide bombings in Bangladesh, in November 2005, which killed two judges.

25. In his writings, which include *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq* (*Milestones*), Qutb, an Egyptian author, theorist and Islamist who was executed by Gemal Abdel Nasser's regime in 1966, advocated a complete system of Islamic morality and government under *Shari'a*. Western "innovations" such as nationalism, civil liberties and liberal social mores were considered by him as dangerous reflections of *jahiliyya*, or the pre-Islamic period of "ignorance" before Islam was revealed.

26. See for example Baxter, Craig (1998) *Bangladesh: From Nation to State*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Hassan, Perween (2007) *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh*. London: I. B. Tauris.

27. Lintner, Bertil (2004) "Religious Extremism and Radicalism in Bangladesh", in Satu Limaye, Robert Wirsing and Mohan Malik (eds) *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*. Honolulu, HI: APCSS, p. 2.

28. Quoted by Mohsin, Amena (2004) "Religion, Politics and Security: The Case of Bangladesh", in Satu Limaye, Robert Wirsing and Mohan Malik (eds) *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*. Honolulu, HI: APCSS, pp. 467–489, at p. 470.

29. Riaz, note 6 above.

30. Interview, British academic, February 2007. This view has been echoed in Uddin, note 5 above, and is underscored by the reaction of traditional rural authorities to the forces of modernity in using the *salish* or *fatwa* to reassert their leadership positions challenged by NGOs and globalization.

31. See www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/wshow/570.

32. Interview, senior Western diplomat, Dhaka, February 2008.

33. The Awami League is also the party which signed a peace accord with separatist groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, leading to the perception that the AL's leadership will be more accommodative and favourable to a Bangladeshi identity that encompasses diverse ethnic and religious groups.

34. For a more in-depth analysis on this point see Fink, Naureen Chowdhury (2010) *Bombs and Ballots: Terrorism, Political Violence and Governance in Bangladesh*. New York: International Peace Institute.

35. Fink, Naureen Chowdhury (2008) "Bangladesh in the Twenty-first Century: Democracy, Development, Terrorism, and its Counterforces", paper presented at Bangladesh in the Twenty First Century conference, Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, MA, June.

36. The quotation marks reflect the perception of the "West" as a Christian entity, or India as a Hindu entity, by those who disregard the wide national, religious, ethnic and cultural diversity within them, and are not intended to suggest a judgement either way.

37. See www.bjp.org/history/htvintro-mm-1.htm.

38. Interview, Bangladeshi-British cultural activist, London, 2008.

39. Hossain, Maneeza (2007) *Broken Pendulum: Bangladesh's Swing to Radicalism*. Washington, DC: Hudson Institute.

40. Interviews conducted with political analysts, military officers and government officials, Bangladesh, February 2008 and February 2009.

41. For more on the role of SAARC in combating terrorism see Rosand, Eric, Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jason Ipe (2009) *Countering Terrorism in South Asia: Strengthening Multilateral Engagement*. New York: International Peace Institute.

42. Jalal, Ayesha (1995) *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 248.

43 Sengupta, Nitish (2007) *Bengal Divided: The Unmaking of a Nation (1905–1971)*. New Delhi: Penguin/Viking.

44. van Schendel, Willem (2002) "Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves", *Journal of Asian Studies* 61(1), pp. 115–147.
45. Ibid., p. 144.
46. Interview, Australian terrorism expert, New York, April 2008.
47. van Schendel, Willem and Itty Abraham (eds) (2005) *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders and the Other Side of Globalization*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p. 5.
48. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7654012.stm.
49. Saigol, Rubina (2006) "The State and Its Limits in Counterterrorism: The Experience of Pakistan and Sri Lanka", in Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.) *Understanding Terrorism in South Asia: Beyond Statist Discourses*. New Delhi: Manohar.