Bombs and Ballots:
Terrorism, Political Violence, and Governance in Bangladesh

Naureen Chowdhury Fink

INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK is Senior Program Officer at the International Peace Institute. Her research interests include politically and religiously motivated violence and terrorism, with a particular focus on the Middle East and South Asia.

CONTENTS

Acronyms

AHAB	*Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh*
AL	Awami League
BEI	Bangladesh Enterprise Institute
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CTED	Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate
CTG	caretaker government
CTITF	Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force
DFID	Department for International Development
HuJI-B	*Harakatul Jihad-i-Islami–Bangladesh*
HuT	*Hizbut-Tahrir*
IOM	Islam-o-Muslim
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
JMB	*Jamatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh*
JMJB	*Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh*
NGO	nongovernmental organization
RAB	Rapid Action Battalion
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SALW	small arms and light weapons
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

Executive Summary

International initiatives to counter terrorism and militancy have more often than not been directed at the military aspects of such threats, with insufficient attention paid to the specific context—the social, political, and regional dynamics—in which they evolve. In Bangladesh, for example, the combination of development challenges, weak governance, violent politics, and regional tensions has proved a combustible mix. These have prompted fears that the state is growing increasingly fragile and that it may be unable to withstand the threats posed by terrorism and violent religious radicalization over the long term.

The terrorist threat in Bangladesh is derived both from groups with strong emphases on jihad, as well as those whose primary focus is on proselytizing (*dawa*), though these may overlap for some groups. Exemplifying the former, groups like the *Jamatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh* (JMB) and *Harakatul Jihad-i-Islami–Bangladesh* (HuJI-B) challenge the legitimacy of the secular government, declare their opposition to democratic political processes, and propose a violent transformation of Bangladesh into an Islamic state. A concurrent surge of religious rhetoric in public and political life in Bangladesh has raised concerns about displacing the traditional practice of Islam in Bangladesh with more rigid and intolerant practices imported from abroad. However, there are also a number of important countervailing trends within Bangladesh that offer a means of combating these threats.

In order to effectively counter the threat of terrorism and its causes, it is vital that key stakeholders better understand the domestic context and operate within the opportunities and limitations it presents. Militancy in Bangladesh feeds off national challenges such as divisive and violent politics, weak governance, and the social impacts of underdevelopment. Moreover, acts of terrorism in Bangladesh are perceived, in part, as an extension of the violent means used by political actors to secure electoral victory and intimidate, if not eliminate, opponents and their supporters.

These challenges combine to create an enabling environment for the emergence of political violence and terrorism by promoting a culture of impunity, promoting confrontational means of resolving political differences, and creating heavily personalized patronage networks in place of strong civic bureaucracies and institutions. A broad-brush counterterrorism policy that fails to take into account these context-specific dynamics will not be effective in addressing the factors that create a permissive environment for terrorism and religious militancy.

The government of Bangladesh's response has been largely reactive, rather than preventive, and it is constrained by resource and capacity limitations. However, the interrelated nature of governance and violence in Bangladesh presents multiple entry points for engagement by Bangladesh's international partners. This paper explores national responses and the gaps therein which provide opportunities for engagement by international actors, and it offers a series of guidelines and recommendations aimed at maximizing resources for effective assistance to counter terrorism and violent religious radicalization.

Introduction

International initiatives to counter terrorism and militancy have more often than not been directed at the military aspects of such threats, with insufficient attention paid to the specific context—the social, political, and regional dynamics—in which they evolve. In Bangladesh, for example, the combination of development challenges, weak governance, violent politics, and regional tensions has proved a combustible mix. Though the threat of terrorism and violent religious radicalization has evolved gradually over the past decade and a half, it took a series of serious attacks across the country in 2005 before Bangladesh appeared on international radar screens. Despite some early successes against militant groups, more recent discoveries of arms caches, and the capture and detention of suspected militant activists suggest that the threat is clear and present, and that it cannot be ignored.[1]

This case study reflects the international community's anxiety, prompted by the events of September 11, 2001, regarding fragile and failing states and their potential as incubators or safe havens for criminals and terrorists. Highlighting

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1   See, for example, Animesh Roul, "Islam-o-Muslim and the Resilience of Terrorism in Bangladesh," *Terrorism Monitor* 2, no. 22 (July 27, 2009).

these concerns, the 2002 US National Security Strategy declared, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones,"[2] and state fragility was later described by World Bank President Robert Zoellick as the "toughest development challenge of our era."[3]

In line with this trend, the numerous social and political challenges confronting Bangladesh have prompted fears that the state is growing increasingly fragile and that it may be unable to withstand the threats posed by terrorism and violent religious radicalization over the long term. Among these challenges are political polarization, weak governance, and the influence of money and violence on politics. In addition, many fear that an ongoing process of "cultural radicalization"[4] could undermine the rights and values enshrined in Bangladesh's constitution and make the country less hospitable to minorities. However, there are also a number of countervailing trends, including a strong sense of nationalism and pride in Bengali cultural traditions, a vibrant civil society, and a will to attempt political renovation, which offer a means of combating these threats.

This largely qualitative study focuses on Bangladesh following the installation of democratic government in 1991. It is based on an extensive review of current and historical literature, as well as interviews conducted over nearly two years in Bangladesh, London, New York, and Washington, DC. Interviewees included members of several political parties, academics, political analysts, officials, and civil-society groups from Bangladesh, as well as international experts and diplomats. These discussions focused on eliciting views on the strength of the terrorist threat in Bangladesh, on arriving at a better understanding of its context, and on identifying the possible roles for international actors to play in supporting the state and its citizens in addressing it.

Based on this research, the paper highlights the importance of tailoring counterterrorism initiatives to the specific contexts in which they emerge and develop. It argues that the threats of terrorism and militancy, or violent religious extremism, in

Bangladesh are best understood in relation to the political and socioeconomic challenges confronting the country. Moreover, the multifaceted nature of the challenge presents the international community with a number of possible intervention points but also a series of limitations within which key stakeholders need to frame their engagement in Bangladesh. Although this paper presents a specific case study and does not purport to put forward any universally applicable theories, it presents some important lessons which may be useful to other countries confronting similar challenges.

The first section will present an overview of key events and actors that shape the terrorist threat in Bangladesh. The second section will introduce the political and social challenges which contribute to an enabling environment for this threat. The third section will highlight some of the countervailing trends in Bangladesh that could be further leveraged to ameliorate these challenges facing the country. Finally, the last section explores the role of national and international actors, including the United Nations, in furthering counterterrorism efforts in Bangladesh and how these interact with other development objectives, including support for improving governance. The paper concludes with guidelines and broad recommendations to help shape this engagement.

The Threat: Terrorism, Political Violence, and Religious Militancy in Bangladesh

In the 1990s, reports began circulating of bombings targeting Bengali cultural events and allegations began to surface of violent groups imposing harsh interpretations of sharia (Islamic law) in rural communities.[5] This violence escalated to a series of explosions and bombings beginning in 2004 that targeted prominent political personalities and government representatives. Particularly alarming was the simultaneous detonation of nearly 400 bombs across all but one of Bangladesh's sixty-four

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2   White House, "The National Security Strategy," (Washington, DC, September 2002), available at http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/ .

3   As quoted in World Bank, "Fragile States 'Toughest Development Challenge of Our Era,'" September 19, 2008, available at
   http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:21908486~pagePK:64257043~piPK:437376~theSitePK:4607,00.html .

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

5   Though Bangladesh acknowledges sharia for family law and personal matters, the state follows a secular legal code.

districts in 2005, heightening concern at home and abroad about the hitherto underestimated capacities of militant groups in Bangladesh. More recent reports of secret arms caches, underground operatives, and the regrouping of banned outfits under new names combine to indicate a resurgence of activity by militant groups and their partners.[6]

Such reports of militant activity have fed fears of more widespread religious radicalization. Even where such a trend may not materialize in violent activity, interviewees voiced concern at the growing potential for extremists to supplant traditionally moderate cultural and religious practices based on liberal Sufi philosophy and Hanafi jurisprudence with more rigid ones derived from the Hanbali school, prevalent in the Middle East. Maneeza Hossain of the Hudson Institute called this trend "cultural radicalization" and argued that Islamists in Bangladesh have created a "fictionalized monolithic Islam."[7]

Militant groups have attempted to manipulate religious radicalization to incite hatred and violence against minorities and impose social mores and norms that challenge traditional Bengali culture, including dress and rituals. Of course, an increase in religiosity should not, in and of itself, be troubling. However, religious radicalization can pose a threat to the state and its citizens when it propagates an extreme ideology that promotes the use of violence and threatens civil liberties enshrined in the constitution, and creates an inhospitable and insecure environment for minority communities.

KEY ACTORS

The terrorist threat in Bangladesh is derived both from groups with strong emphases on jihad, as well as those whose primary focus is on proselytizing (*dawa*), though these may overlap for some groups.[8] Among the former is the *Harakatul Jihad-i-Islami–Bangladesh* (HuJI-B) whose founder, Fazlul Rahman, reportedly received seed money from Osama bin Laden to start the organization, and endorsed his 1998 declaration of jihad.[9] Other similar groups include *Jamatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh* (JMB), *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* (JMJB), and *Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh* (AHAB). Divisions among their membership are somewhat murky and in many cases can be assumed to overlap substantially.[10] However, these groups are believed to be constituent members of the parent group Al Muhajedeen.[11] JMB and JMJB have been implicated in numerous bombings, including the first suicide attacks in Bangladesh and the simultaneous 400 bombs, carried out in 2005.

Groups like the JMB, JMJB, and HuJI-B challenge the legitimacy of the secular government, declare their opposition to democratic political processes, and propose a violent transformation of Bangladesh into an Islamic state. 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 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, Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, is committed to establish the rule of Allah in this country under the system of *Qital* [sic].[12]

JMB's violent activities have reportedly generated

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6   The arms cache found in Bogra (southern Bangladesh) on March 24, 2009, yielded "a bomb bluster, nine firearms, 2,500 bullets, 3,000 grenade splinters, an explosives blaster, four pairs of German-made uniforms, 200 gram gunpowder, bullet-making components and equipment, two walkie-talkies, two bows, two remote control devices, binoculars, a book on how to operate firearms and other extremist literature." Ahmede Hussain, "From England with Hate," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), April 3, 2009.

7   Hossain, *Broken Pendulum*.

8   For many, the term "jihad" refers primarily to a spiritual quest for self improvement, the "greater jihad"; however, for the purposes of this paper, "jihadist" will refer to those who frame their militancy or terrorist acts in the language of jihad as a religious war, and advocate the use of violence to achieve an Islamic state and society (often referred to as the "lesser jihad").

9   Osama bin Laden's "Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders" bears four signatures in addition to his own, two from Egypt, one from Pakistan, and one from Bangladesh. See World Islamic Front, "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," February 23, 2008, available at www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm . On March 5, 2008, then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice designated *Harakatu Jihad-i-Islami–Bangladesh* (HuJI-B) a "foreign terrorist organization" and a "specially designated global terrorist" under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224. Embassy of the United States of America, Dhaka (March 6, 2008), *Designation of Harakat Ul-Jihad-i-Islami/Bangladesh (HUJI-B) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization*, Press Release, available at http://dhaka.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/k5cpKkt6AYocbo7hpdTlCg/Mar6_huji_en.pdf .

10 International Crisis Group, "Bangladesh Today," *Asia Report* No. 121 (Brussels: ICG, October 23, 2006).

11 Anwar Ali, "JMB Spreads its Tentacles in 5 Years," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 19, 2005, available at www.thedailystar.net/2005/08/19/d5081901033.htm .

12 Jihad Unspun, "From Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh," available at www.jihadunspun.com/index-side_internal.php?article=103816&list=/home.php& , as quoted in Eben Kaplan, "Nationwide Attacks Raise Fears of Growing Islamist Presence," August 29, 2005, available at www.cfr.org/publication/8767/bangladesh.html .

a widespread loss of support among Bangladeshis, who may have sympathized with their aspiration for more Islamic government or a greater Islamicization of society, but not the use of violence. It seems JMB learned from this mistake, as there has not been another attempt at an attack on that scale. Moreover, as one report notes, Bangladeshi groups are likely to learn from the mistake of groups like al-Qaida in Iraq, whose brutal tactics and high numbers of civilian casualties caused a backlash among Iraqis.[13] In April 2009, a small group of breakaway JMB members reportedly formed a new group called Islam-o-Muslim (IOM), focused on using small arms and light weapons (SALW) and assassination-style attacks, rather than mass-casualty operations, to promote jihad in Bangladesh.[14]

Among those who place a lesser emphasis on jihad are *Hizbut-Tahrir* (HuT) and *Tablighi Jamaat*, whose public activities focus on proselytizing rather than on promoting violent acts. HuT openly opposes the democratic political system, describing it as an "imperialist" imposition. They advocate the unification of the Muslim *ummah* and the establishment of a universal caliphate. HuT also espouses a militarized approach to national development that includes compulsory military service, the acquisition of advanced technology to "maintain the regional balance of power," and a foreign policy that abandons multilateral engagement and aims to make Islam the dominant belief system globally.[15] Though HuT is based in Bangladesh, its members proselytize actively among the South Asian diaspora, particularly in the UK.[16]

The *Tablighi Jamaat* is a more complex case.[17] Though nominally focused on proselytizing, its vast and secretive nature makes it extremely difficult to monitor, especially as membership is loose, voluntary, and permeates all levels of society. Its activities are supported largely by donations, cash or in kind, from members. *Tabligh's* extensive membership network across South Asia, and among the South Asian diaspora, gives it extensive international reach. Though it is generally considered a peaceful organization focused on *dawa*, some analysts have suggested that its loose membership structures and opaque organization make it an ideal gateway to more radical ideas or activities, and that its network provides resources for the movement of illicit goods and ideas.[18]

The surge of religious rhetoric in public and political life in Bangladesh has been broadly ascribed to the ascendance of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, an Islamist party, as a member of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) coalition in 2001-2006. It was widely believed that *Jamaat's* "kingmaker" role in securing an electoral majority for the ruling party would be leveraged to extend shelter and immunity for militant Islamist activists and groups. The BNP's disinclination to pursue suspected terrorists was perceived to be a result of their reluctance to aggravate their partners in *Jamaat*. For its role in supporting the BNP, *Jamaat* was awarded two ministerial posts—Agriculture and Social Welfare—through which it cultivated support among rural constituencies.

Despite its engagement in a largely secular political process, *Jamaat's* declared objective remains the transformation of Bangladesh into an Islamic state. However, it believes this can only be pursued legitimately through the democratic process. As one senior *Jamaat* leader explained, the state they envisage would retain many of the institutions and mechanisms of a democratic society, including an independent judiciary and a parliament open to participation by women and minorities. However, he added that *Jamaat* would require that any legislation passed did not contravene Quranic precepts.[19]

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13 Ryan Clarke and Shafqat Munir, "Avoiding Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh," *CTC Sentinel 2*, no. 5 (May 2009), pp. 20-23.

14 According to some reports, a number of JMB members arrested earlier are now believed to be IOM members. Analysts note, however, that small splinter groups may have been created by JMB and its affiliates to carry out attacks without tarnishing their name or incurring public displeasure. Roul, "Islam-O-Muslim."

15 Office of the Chief Coordinator and Official Spokesman of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in Bangladesh (December 25, 2008), *Hizb ut-Tahrir in Bangladesh Holds National Conference on Khilafah—the Correct Leadership and Government System*, available at www.khilafat.org/newPages/PressRelease/Resources/PR_ENG_081225_01.pdf .

16 A personal account of HuT's activities in the UK has been published by controversial author Ed Hussain, a former HuT member who has since publicly rejected their ideology and currently leads the Quilliam Foundation, a think tank dedicated to countering extremist Islamic ideology. Ed Hussain, *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw, and Why I Left* (London: Penguin, 2007).

17 For a brief but detailed overview, see Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "Tablighi Jamaat: An Indirect Line to Terrorism," January 23, 2008, available at www.stratfor.com/weekly/tablighi_jamaat_indirect_line_terrorism .

18 Fernando Reinares, "A Case Study of the January 2008 Suicide Bomb Plot in Barcelona," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 1 (January 2009), available at www.teachingterror.net/Sentinel/2-1.pdf ; IPI interview, Southeast Asian academic, Dhaka, February 2009.

19 He illustrated this by explaining that, for example, parliament in an Islamic Bangladesh would not be allowed to sanction same-sex marriages, even if it gained the support of a majority of MPs. IPI Interview, senior *Jamaat* leader, New York, September, 2008.

Jamaat's reputation in Bangladesh is colored by its pro-Pakistani stance in 1971 and accusations of war crimes perpetrated against pro-Bangladesh activists and intellectuals. Consequently, in a bid to gain public legitimacy and develop a base of support, *Jamaat* has initiated parallel processes of political engagement through the democratic system and social activism to "Islamicize" Bangladeshi citizens by providing much-needed social services. This has been possible through impressive organization supported by strong funding from membership dues, private-sector investment, and external funding sources.[20] Even critics acknowledged their reputation for integrity, noting that, "*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."[21] Yet, in the most recent elections, it suffered the loss of all but two parliamentary seats, a loss widely attributed to popular sentiment against religious politics and *Jamaat's* role during the independence movement.[22]

The complexity and nuance required in effective counterterrorism strategies are highlighted by the fact that the terrorist threat in Bangladesh is derived from a wide array of groups with diverse agendas. Though the focus has been on Islamist militancy in the post-9/11 years, a report by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) suggests that leftist groups have posed threats on a par with, or greater than, those posed by jihadist groups as recently as 2007-2008.[23] Additionally, Bangladesh has long faced an insurgency by the Rohingya Solidarity Organization seeking control of the Rakhine state in Myanmar, as well as a tribal autonomy movement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).[24]

ELEMENTS OF A TRANSNATIONAL THREAT

Though they incorporate the language of universal faith and a global *ummah*, or Islamic community, HuJI-B, JMB, JMJB, and others have largely focused their activities on the domestic political arena, rather than the pursuit of supranational objectives. However, the intellectual, social, and operational connections among South Asian groups suggest that future operations are likely to be increasingly transnational. It is widely believed that members of these groups were influenced through their participation in the Afghan wars of the 1980s, which forged bonds among Islamist activists and militants across political boundaries.[25]

The widespread belief that the intelligence agencies of India and Pakistan, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) respectively, have been fighting a proxy war in Bangladesh underscores concerns regarding the regionalization of the terrorist threat. Indeed, one senior academic believes this may become one of the primary elements of the terrorist threat in South Asia in the near future.[26] It is believed that the RAW provided support to Rohingyas and activists in the CHT, while the ISI has been linked to numerous militant Islamic groups. Conversely, the government of India has long accused Bangladesh of harboring wanted terrorism suspects, including a key figure in the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Paresh Barua, and of hosting terrorist training camps on its soil, an accusation Bangladesh vehemently denies.

Reported links between Bangladeshi groups and groups in different countries have also raised concerns regarding the transnational nature of the threat, what one analyst called an "import and export" problem: imported following the Afghan

20 Sreeradha Datta, "Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat from Within," *The Journal of South Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (April 2007).

21 Philip Bowring, "Not Doing Badly, Thank You," *International Herald Tribune*, April 16, 2005, quoted in Datta, "Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh," p. 153

22 However, as Professor Ali Riaz has pointed out, the *Jamaat* is not necessarily a spent force as the proportion of the popular vote remained relatively static in the December 2008 elections; despite a slight increase in the percentage of votes received over earlier years, they failed to attract new voters given the rise in voter turnout in these elections. See Ali Riaz, "Bangladesh: 2008 Elections and Democracy," *South Asia Journal*, No. 25, July-September 2009.

23 Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, "Draft Report on Trends of Militancy in Bangladesh August 2007-January 2008," presented at a conference on responses of the religious community to terrorism in Bangladesh, Dhaka, February 28, 2008.

24 The latter was largely mitigated by a 1997 peace accord, though the agreement is still awaiting full implementation. See Amena Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

25 The presence of a Bangladeshi contingent in Afghanistan was alluded to by John Walker Lindh, an American who fought alongside the Taliban and reported that fighters were assigned to groups based on language, including Bengali, Urdu, and Arabic. For details, see CNN, "Transcript of John Walker Interview," July 4, 2002, available at http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/12/20/ret.walker.transcript/ .

26 IPI interview, senior Bangladeshi-American academic, New York, July 2009.

wars and exported by militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[27] For example, it has been reported that HuJI-B is the Bangladeshi incarnation of *Harakatul Jihad-al-Islami*, Pakistan, and that it has been active in India, where it was accused of perpetrating the March 2006 explosions in Varanasi, indicating a strong likelihood of additional cross-border operations.[28]

Intelligence analysts in Bangladesh and abroad have also raised concerns about the interface between criminality, political violence, and militant groups, and about the role of local and transnational organized criminal networks in supporting terrorist activity in Bangladesh.[29] They acknowledge that the vulnerabilities of the state—including a long porous border, limited law-enforcement capacity, and lack of bilateral or regional mechanisms to cooperate on counterterrorism and criminal investigations—make it a suitable transit point for the illicit movement of people, SALW, and narcotics, the profits from which have supposedly been directed at times to militant outfits or their patrons.[30]

For example, reports suggest that weapons arrive at the southern Bangladeshi port of Chittagong before being disbursed among a myriad of jihadist, leftist, and separatist groups in the region, including HuJI-B.[31] Corruption among border officials and local government authorities exacerbates these vulnerabilities, where a small payment in cash or the promise of political support buys passage for contraband items and illegal persons.[32] A confessional statement by a JMB activist in June 2009 further confirmed the use of border routes to smuggle in bomb-making materials and small arms.[33] Recently, an operative of Pakistan-based *Lashkar-e-Toiba*, believed to be responsible for the 2008 Mumbai bombings, was arrested in Bangladesh. He has also been accused of working for notorious underworld figure Dawood Ibrahim, who was charged with masterminding the 1993 Mumbai bombings and heading the criminal syndicate D-Company.

These factors indicate not only an intellectual and operational convergence among groups throughout South Asia, but increased linkages between organized crime and terrorism in the region as well. Moreover, these connections suggest that groups in Bangladesh are attuned to events in India and Pakistan, learning from the errors and successes of their counterparts and drawing on public responses to them in order to refine their own strategies.

The transnational aspects of the terrorist threat have also focused the attention of international governments on the South Asian diaspora. In April 2008 British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith claimed that "…there is a potential linkage between terrorists in Britain and terrorists in Bangladesh and we have a shared interest and shared endeavor to tackle it through both short- and long-term measures." In May 2009, a British newspaper quoted security experts, warning that "extremists training in Bangladesh could pose a major threat to Britain," adding that the South Asian country has become a "safe haven" for terrorists.[34] Thus, although terrorists in Bangladesh have focused on domestic targets, it is very possible that their future activity will increasingly target transnational audiences and victims. Moreover, it is possible that Bangladeshis radicalized abroad could direct their attention back to Bangladesh; the discovery of the arms cache in Bogra (southern Bangladesh), under the banner of Green Crescent, incorporated as a charity in the UK, underscores such concerns.[35]

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27 IPI interview, senior Bangladeshi analyst, July 2009, Dhaka.

28 South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI)," 2008, available at www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist_outfits/HuJI.htm .

29 See, for example, Aminul Karim, "Emerging Model of Counter-Terror Infrastructure," in *Global War on Terror: Bangladesh Perspective*, edited by Mufleh Osmany and Muhammad Kabir (Dhaka: Academic Press and Publishers Library with the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, 2007), p.64; senior Bangladeshi diplomat, speaking at conference on "Transnational Security Challenges," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, December 2007; IPI interview, senior intelligence officer, Dhaka, February 2008; IPI interview, senior intelligence analyst, London, February 2008.

30 IPI interview, senior military officer, Dhaka, February 2008; IPI interview, senior intelligence analyst, London, February 2008.

31 Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: Extremist Islamist Consolidation," South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2001, available at www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume14/Article1.htm .

32 Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderlands: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem, 2004).

33 Hasibur Rahman Bilu, "JMB Took Part in Kansat Movement," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), June 22, 2009, available at www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=93664 .

34 The New Nation, "Britain Urges Bangladesh to Lift State of Emergency: UK-Bangla Terrorist Outfits Have Links, Claims Smith," April 10, 2008, available at http://nation.ittefaq.com/issues/2008/04/10/news0988.htm ; and Rachel Shields, "Bangladesh is 'Safe Haven for British Islamic Terrorists,'" *Independent*, May 24, 2009, available at www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/bangladesh-is-safe-haven-for-british-islamic-terrorists-1690127.html .

35 Hussain, "From England with Hate."

The Context: Social and Political Facets of the Challenge

In order to effectively combat the threat of terrorism and its causes, it is vital for key stakeholders to better understand the domestic context and operate within the opportunities and limitations it presents. Militancy in Bangladesh feeds off national challenges, such as divisive and violent politics, weak governance, and the social impacts of underdevelopment. These are complicated by the influx of ideas and resources from abroad being directed towards transforming Bangladesh into a theocratic state or imposing more rigid religious and social practices in place of traditionally moderate ones.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

The potential replacement of traditional Bengali cultural practices and regionally informed religious customs with a more rigid interpretation of Islam has aroused widespread concern over Bangladesh. Some analysts, such as Imtiaz Ahmed, believe that such a transformation has already taken place and that the real threat is "contagion," a process through which others accept rigid religious practices unquestioningly as cultural norms. He argues that the changing nature of Islamic thought and practice in Bangladesh is largely due to the influence of ideas from the Middle East, through the movement of migrant workers, funds, and ideas.[36] Instead of being influenced by the practice of Islam in Southeast Asia, much of which is derived from the same Sufistic tradition as Islam in Bengal, in the last decade or two, Bangladeshi Muslims have started to take their lead from the Arab world.

As a consequence, religious practices, dress codes, and even language are increasingly shaped by stricter Wahabbi codes.[37] Whereas Bangladeshis once used the Persian "Khuda Hafiz" to say goodbye, the more Arabized "Allah Hafiz" is now used. Colorful saris and *shalwar kameez* worn by women in Bangladesh are being covered by black burqas—despite the fact that Hanafi practice allows for colorful veils—and public behavior is increasingly considered in light of Islamic codes. Art shaped by centuries of interaction among Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim civilizations in Bengal has become controversial for being "un-Islamic," as demonstrated by protests over statues of traditional *baul* musicians in Dhaka's international airport or attacks on traditional theatrical performances called *jatras*.[38]

In addition to increasing Islamization, Bangladesh has witnessed a worrying rise in violence against minorities. Widespread reports of violence against the Hindu minority, also traditionally aligned with the Awami League (AL), followed the BNP's electoral victory in 2001. To many, this confirmed suspicions that *Jamaat's* position in government would influence the BNP to take a more rightist stance against minorities. As a result, Bangladesh was listed as a violator of religious freedoms by the US Commission on International Religious Freedoms.[39] Though Bangladesh was recently delisted, concerns remain regarding the protection of minority rights in an increasingly Islamicized society.[40]

"Bangladesh has become a rougher, tougher place," remarked one senior western diplomat and

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36 Imtiaz Ahmed, "Terrorism Beyond Reason: Possibilities and Limits," paper presented at the seminar "Terrorism in the 21st Century: Bangladeshi Perspective," organized by Center for Strategic and Peace Studies, March 10, 2007; also IPI interview, senior academic, Dhaka, February 2008.

37 This is in contrast to local and regional practices that were largely based on the more liberal Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy. Ahmed, "Terrorism Beyond Reason."

38 The Indian, "Bangladesh Government Removes Baul Statues, Triggers Countrywide Protests," October 25, 2008, available at www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/bangladesh-government-removes-baul-statues-triggers-countrywide-protests_100111415.html .

39 See, for example, BBC News, "Analysis: Fears of Bangladeshi Hindus," October 19, 2001, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1609049.stm . Bangladesh was listed as a country deemed to violate religious freedoms by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedoms. Recently, Bangladesh was removed from this list and recognized the December 2008 elections as "relatively free of violence" and the AL as "more favorably disposed towards minority rights protection." This verdict also follows a series of testimonies urging the CTG and subsequent governments to move forward on protecting minorities and religious freedoms. See United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2009, available at www.uscirf.gov/images/AR2009/ar%202009%20final%20with%20cover.pdf , pp. 222-224.

40 The *Vested Property Act* (formerly the *Enemy Properties Act*) has been used a means for capturing Hindu-owned land, on the premise that it was abandoned by "enemies" during Indo-Pakistani wars. Widespread allegations suggest this was used by powerful elites to capture land owned by minorities, and the emigration of Hindus from Bangladesh has been widely ascribed to this Act. Though it was repealed in 2001, there has been little advancement in implementing the repeal. A former press secretary to a president of Bangladesh observed, "Those discriminatory laws and post seventy-five constitutional amendments not only hurt the feelings of the minorities severely, their confidence on Bangladesh state machinery have been dwindled; they have been effectively transformed into second class citizens." Rabindranath Trivedi, "The Legacy of Enemy Turned Vested Property Act in Bangladesh," *Asian Tribune*, May 29, 2007, available at www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/5925 .

long-time Bangladesh observer. In 2004, the government of Bangladesh banned publications by the *Ahmadiyya* group, considered by many Sunni Muslims to be a heretical sect because they believe their founder, Mirza Gulam Ahmad, was a prophet.[41] For hardliners in Bangladesh, the ban was not enough; they threatened to dismantle the *Ahmadiyya* mosque if the government did not declare the group "non-Muslim." This reflects a significant transformation from earlier periods when religious divisions were largely a matter of private practice. As one writer and political adviser recalled, "When we were young we didn't even know what *Qadiani* [*Ahmadiyyas*] meant; now everyone is labeled [according to religious identity]."[42] A civil-society activist also observed, "When we were young, we celebrated everything together—Durga Puja, Eid, Christmas—but now, slowly, you do not see communities observing these."[43]

The evolution of radicalization can be ascribed to historical, socioeconomic, and geopolitical factors. The roots of Bangladeshi nationalism can be traced to a largely secular discourse reaching back to the first partition of Bengal in 1905, after which it developed in opposition to the Hindus of West Bengal. Following the partition of India in 1947 and the emergence of Pakistan, Bengali Muslim sentiment turned against the central authority in western Pakistan, and it was grievances regarding ethno-linguistic identity, economic development, and security which fueled the movement for independence in 1971.[44] Consequently, at independence, Bangladesh was declared a secular state in order to accommodate multiple religious and cultural groups. Reflecting the Bengali term for secularism, *dharma nirapekshata*, which literally translates to "religious neutrality," Sheikh Mujib, Bangladesh's first leader, explained,

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.[45]

Yet, as Taj Hashmi noted, "'secularism' was never the raison d'etre of the Liberation War."[46] A few years later, in 1977, to assuage the concerns of Western governments about the emergence of a leftist state in Bangladesh and to appease other Islamic states unhappy at the breakup of Pakistan, President Zia introduced more center-right social and economic policies and a greater role for religion. He inserted the preamble "*Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*," ("in the name of Allah, the most Beneficent, the Merciful") into the constitution and redefined "secular" to be "with absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah," by proclamation. This top-down process was continued by the government of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who declared Islam to be the state religion in 1988 and sought to establish a "mosque-centered" society.[47]

This process of Islamization has also been taking place at the grassroots level, influenced by returnees from Afghanistan and the unsupervised flow of resources towards religious and charitable institutions. In addition, local imams have begun to use traditional village councils, or *salish*, to reassert their authority through *fatwas* (voluntary legal opinions).[48] Several such cases have reportedly ended in violent punishment for the accused, who are often women.[49] One British academic sees this not so much as an increase in religious fervor, but "the growing pains of modernity; a reaction against [Bangladesh's] own progress," fueled by resentment among local authorities, such as imams and village elders, at the challenge posed by globalization to traditional power structures.[50] Nevertheless, this

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41 Islamic belief holds that Mohammed was the final prophet and consequently the premise of the *Ahmadiyya* belief, that Ahmad was a prophet, is considered heretical by many Muslims. *Ahmadiyyas* however, counter that Mirza Gulam Ahmad was not considered a "law-giving" prophet but that his job was merely to propagate the laws enunciated by Islam's prophet Mohammed. However, these fine distinctions have fallen on largely deaf ears in the mainstream Muslim community.

42 IPI interview, eminent writer and journalist, Dhaka, February, 2008.

43 IPI interviews, senior Western diplomat, and senior civil-society activist, Dhaka, February, 2008. These remain official government holidays in Bangladesh.

44 For a fuller discussion of this history, see Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, "The Roots of Bangladeshi National Identity: Their Impact on State Behavior," Working Paper No. 63 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, June 10, 2009).

45 As quoted in Amena Mohsin, "Religion, Politics, and Security: The Case of Bangladesh," in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, edited by Satu Limaye, Robert Wirsing, and Mohan Malik (Honolulu, HI: APCSS, 2004), pp. 467-489, p.470.

46 Taj Hashmi, "The Sharia, Mullah, and Muslims in Bangladesh," 2005, available at www.mukto-mona.com/Articles/taj_hashmi/sharia_mullah.htm .

47 It was noted by some Bangladeshi interviewees that this was a top-down process, and not a product of popular demand.

48 For more on the nature of *fatwas* in Bangladesh, see Ahmed, "Terrorism Beyond Reason."

49 Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

50 IPI interview, British academic, London, February, 2008.

can have significant implications. For example, the development activities of several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that seek to empower women through financial independence and entrepreneurship have been targeted by militants and accused of promoting "un-Islamic" behavior.[51]

POLITICAL CHALLENGES

The deterioration of governance and the rise of political violence in Bangladesh have been widely ascribed to the polarized relationship among key political players and the prevalence of corruption and criminality among bureaucrats and politicians. Acts of terrorism in Bangladesh are perceived, in part, as an extension of the violent means used by political actors to secure electoral victory and intimidate, if not eliminate, opponents and their supporters.

Since democratic government was ushered in following a popular movement in 1991, political power has alternated between the center-right BNP (1991-1996; 2001-2006) and the center-left AL (1996-2001; 2009-present).[52] Despite the initial optimism fueled by this transformation, politics has grown increasingly polarized, largely due to the acrimonious relationship between the two leaders, Sheikh Hasina Wajed of the AL and Khaleda Zia of the BNP. However, both are strongly linked to Bangladesh's independence struggle, and in the eyes of their supporters, both Wajed and Zia derive tremendous legitimacy from this connection.[53]

This has proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enables them to create and sustain political parties with the leverage to win credible democratic victories. This is notwithstanding that many Bangladeshis continue to voice grievances related to their day-to-day life, such as continuing poverty, high commodity prices, unemployment, and personal insecurity. On the other hand, the intensely personalized leadership of both parties precludes the development of an issues-based political discourse and voting is largely based on the appeal of leaders rather than party performance.

The personalized nature of party leadership also constrains attempts to democratize internal party structures and constricts avenues for political debate and constructive opposition. In both the AL and BNP, all power and decision-making authority is concentrated in the chairperson, though alternative mechanisms are enshrined in party constitutions.[54] Party members remain heavily dependent on patronage from the leaders and the party elite. Consequently, there is little incentive for party members to challenge policy decisions that come from the top or engage in bipartisan initiatives lest these compromise their political future.[55] Similarly, the civil administration is intensely politicized, as advancement is contingent upon the patronage of political parties and leaders.[56]

The inability of both parties to engage each other constructively is reflected in the deterioration of political discourse in the Parliament, where parties have made use of their majority to sideline the opposition in a "winner-takes-all" approach, dubbed by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) as "partyarchy."[57] Parliament has not functioned as an effective forum for democratic debate because there is little tolerance for dissent from the ruling party, irrespective of which party is in power. This leaves little space for a "loyal opposition."

The opposition's frustration at the lack of political space for constructive debate has often been expressed via boycotts or *hartals* (general

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51 Anand Kumar, "Bangladesh: Islamists Attack NGOs as Part of Jihad," March 21, 2005, available at www.saag.org/common/uploaded_files/paper1295.html .

52 In 1991, a widespread pro-democracy movement removed President Ershad from power after nearly a decade of autocratic rule and a Westminster-style parliamentary system was subsequently installed. However, the parliament in Bangladesh has a unicameral legislature, rather than a bicameral one, as in the UK. Additionally, it does not support the "shadow government" arrangement, whereby sitting cabinet members are "shadowed" by counterparts in the opposition.

53 Wajed is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the charismatic leader credited with inspiring the independence movement and the first premier of the newborn state; and Zia is the widow of President Ziaur Rahman who remains revered for his bravery and leadership in 1971. The assassination of both these men prompted a highly charged feud between the families regarding the rightful leader of the independence movement and their subsequent legacies.

54 Institute of Governance Studies, "The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2007," (Dhaka: BRAC University, May 2008), available at www.igs-bracu.ac.bd/UserFiles/File/archive_file/SOG_2007%20(without%20annex).pdf .

55 Under Article 70 of the constitution, the penalty for voting against the party's directive is the loss one's parliamentary seat and its accompanying privileges and benefits. This provision deters moderates in both parties from working together to forge consensus on initiatives deemed in the national interest. It is a fundamental structural factor that reinforces a zero-sum political culture in the country. See A. Tariq Karim and C. Christine Fair, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads," USIP Special Report (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2007); see also also Bangladeshnews.com.bd, "Bhuiyan's Salam to Khaleda Goes in Vain," June 5, 2008, available at www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2008/06/05/bhuiyans-salam-to-khaleda-goes-in-vain/ .

56 Institute of Governance Studies, "The State of Governance."

57 Ibid.

strikes). These frequently result in street violence.[58] Both the BNP and the AL have used these tactics as they alternated in power since 1991. Ultimately, this means that the ruling party is barely challenged on legislation it brings before Parliament. Contentious issues are rarely debated vigorously, thus failing to ensure that people's diverse interests and concerns are heard and considered.

The possibility that political parties may hold unchecked power has created strong incentives to win elections at any cost and to use violence to pursue political ends, as a "regular" mode of political expression. As one senior South Asian diplomat noted, more people have died in clashes between political parties in Bangladesh than in terrorist attacks.[59] This use of violence as a means of addressing political differences has wide-ranging implications. There has been a precipitous increase in the use of armed gangs, known as *mastaans*, to intimidate political opponents, persuade reluctant voters, and collect extortive fees from businesses. This has become such a common practice that it is now considered an overhead cost of doing business in Bangladesh.[60] The violence employed by the student wings of the main political parties is also particularly troubling as battles among the AL's *Chattra League*, BNP's *Chattra Dal*, and *Jamaat's Islami Chattra Shibbir* are viewed as proxies for national politics, and student leaders often move into the national political arena.

The susceptibility of government institutions to fall victim to violence as a means of expressing political disagreement was illustrated in February 2009 during a mutiny of the border security force, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), which resulted in the death of at least fifty-nine officers who had been seconded from the army. The massacre, which lasted nearly thirty-six hours and took place in the BDR's Dhaka barracks, demonstrated an extreme example of violence being used as a vehicle to express opposition or longstanding grievances.[61]

In addition to violence, the prevalence of corruption negatively impacts the perceived legitimacy of the government and contributes to an environment tolerant of extralegal or even illegal activity. Bangladesh was ranked 147th out of 180 on Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.[62] While political parties accept contributions from business interests in most democratic countries, running for office is increasingly seen as a business investment in Bangladesh because the unchecked power of the ruling party offers significant access to national resources. The result is a "rent-seeking collusion among political parties, state machinery and commercial interests," in which businesspeople run for election or support a particular candidate in order to exploit public institutions for material gain once in office.[63]

The civil service lacks many of the mechanisms required to inoculate it against this trend, including few means to enforce discipline, insufficient codes of conduct, little or no relationship between performance and advancement, an inadequate and inefficient pay structure, and few enforceable rules regarding transparency. Therefore, as Rehman Sobhan reports, officials have little incentive to resist being drawn into this corrupt system.[64]

The appeal of Islamism and the ability of militant groups to build support are often ascribed to disappointment and frustration regarding the inability of successive governments and political

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58 A UNDP report observed that workers in the informal transport sector, street hawkers, and vendors earned 50-60 percent less during a *hartal*, and that many day laborers must resort to borrowing money in order to survive. United Nations Development Programme, "Beyond Hartals: Towards Democratic Dialogue in Bangladesh," (Dhaka: UNDP, March 2005).

59 IPI interview, senior South Asian diplomat, Dhaka, February 2008.

60 Rehman Sobhan, "Structural Dimensions of Malgovernance in Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 4, 2004. Both the BNP and AL reportedly use *mastaans* to persecute their opponents' party workers. Politicians also reportedly manipulate law-enforcement institutions for the protection of their own *mastaans* and party members when they are in office, employing a tit-for-tat strategy against one another when they alternate in power.

61 Official inquiries reported the underlying cause to be grievances of junior personnel related to rations and career advancement within the BDR. As the events were unfolding, there were also suspicions that they were linked to Bangladesh's counterterrorism efforts, as the RAB officer charged with leading several anti-JMB efforts was among those killed. For more details, see Shafqat Munir, "The BDR Mutiny: Understanding National and Regional Implications," RUSI Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, March 2009, available at http://pakistanpal.wordpress.com/2009/03/30/the-bdr-mutiny-in-bangladesh-understanding-the-national-and-regional-implications/ ; also IPI interviews with journalists and analysts, Dhaka, February 2009.

62 Transparency International Bangladesh, "Documents on Corruption Perceptions Index 2008," September 23, 2008, available at www.ti-bangladesh.org/research/CPI-2008-923.pdf .

63 Sobhan, "Malgovernance in Bangladesh."

64 Ibid. Bangladesh has an Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), but its chairperson and commissioners have been routinely accused of links to the ruling party. Under the recent caretaker government, which came to power following a major crisis in January 2007 to prepare the country for elections, the ACC was revived and Lieutenant General (retd.) Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury was appointed as its chair on the basis of his reputation for probity. He attempted to launch a major anticorruption campaign during the term of the caretaker government, which lasted until January 2009, and was kept in place by the newly elected AL government. However, Mashud resigned in April 2009 with little explanation, amid rumors that the political environment for his work had become untenable.

leaders to deliver on their promises. As one senior academic noted, the failure of the secular leadership to close the gap between rich and poor in Bangladesh could prove dangerous, citing the example of prerevolutionary Iran. Moreover, despite several successful elections, Bangladesh has become what Rounaq Jahan, quoting Fareed Zakaria, has called an "illiberal democracy," characterized by the breakdown of law and order and erosion of accountability. A prolonged focus on electoral processes has led to the neglect of other vital elements of democratization, such as political debate and dialogue, rule of law, and bipartisanship.[65] An article in the prominent Bangladeshi newspaper magazine *Forum* expressed frustration at the inability of democracy to deliver the expected dividends:

> The years 1991-2006 marked 15 years of "uninterrupted democracy" in Bangladesh. But instead of nurturing democracy, those fifteen years cumulatively brought about a near-failed state by January 11, 2007. Looking back at those, and the years 2007-08, it's difficult to pinpoint when democracy was delivered/interrupted or when basic freedoms were guaranteed/curtailed. If we consider political violence, reigns of corruption, and undemocratic institutions—we could be talking of any period from 1991 to 2006.[66]

Public confidence in the political process has been severely eroded. This is largely attributed to the factors described above—deterioration of the parliamentary system, dysfunctional political parties, increased use of violence for political ends, collusion between politics and business, and widespread corruption. Reflecting on these issues, one prominent newspaper editor in Bangladesh wrote:

> While I refuse to accept the argument of a "failed state" it would be unrealistic for me to deny the fact that, due to the failure of our successive governments, our social fabric itself has been put under severe strain… The way our country has been run in the last

13 years has not helped to strengthen our faith either in our state or in our future. On the contrary it has considerably eroded our faith in both.[67]

These challenges combine to create an enabling environment for the emergence of political violence and terrorism by promoting a culture of impunity, promoting confrontational means of resolving political differences, and creating heavily personalized patronage networks in place of strong civic bureaucracies and institutions. The interviews and research suggested that deteriorating governance and confrontational politics over several decades have contributed extensively to a normalization of the use of violence for political ends. Indeed, Rehman Sobhan argues that governance is Bangladesh's paramount problem and maintains that malgovernance had become structural—it is embedded in the social and political forces which govern the distribution of power and influence within the country.[68] Moreover the inability of successive governments to deliver on the promises of democratic governance has created space for radical religious groups to challenge the legitimacy of the Bangladeshi government, to charge that it is not able to meet the needs and expectations of its citizens, and to offer their own vision and means to do so.

Positive Trends in Bangladesh

Given the severity of the challenges described above, why has Bangladesh not descended further into chaos and insecurity? While the confluence of weak governance, development needs, and political violence would seem to make it an ideal candidate for state fragility or even failure, Bangladesh is also home to strong cultural, social, and political forces that are working to counteract these challenges. Citizens have demonstrated their overwhelming preference for democratic governance despite repeated attempts to install autocratic rule before 1991.[69] Political leaders and civil-society actors—

65 Rounaq Jahan, "The Challenges of Institutionalizing Democracy in Bangladesh," Working Paper No. 39 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University Singapore, March 6, 2008).

66 Rashida Ahmad, "The 1/11 Paradox," *Forum* magazine, *Daily Star* (Dhaka), March 2009, available at www.thedailystar.net/forum/2009/march/paradox.htm .

67 Anam's full editorial illustrates the disappointment of many Bangladeshis with the democratic governments since 1991, noting that both dominant political parties bear blame for making parliament dysfunctional, manipulating their electoral majorities to marginalize any opposition, and turning the mechanism of government into what he called "a structure of extortion" for the benefit of some senior politicians. For the full piece see, Mafuz Anam, "'Failed State' and Bangladesh," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), June 11, 2004, available at www.thedailystar.net/2004/06/11/d40611020328.htm .

68 Sobhan, "Structural Dimensions."

69 This is in consonance with a Gallup poll demonstrating that voters, including the poor who are traditionally thought to favor "bread and butter" issues over democracy, overwhelmingly support democracy, though they might be dissatisfied with a government's ability to deliver. Gallup, "Bangladeshis Positive Despite Political Uncertainty," October 12, 2007, available at www.gallup.com/poll/101869/Bangladeshis-Positive-Despite-Political-Uncertainty.aspx .

including NGOs, the media, and cultural and religious associations—have made efforts to address the gaps in governance and service delivery and raise awareness about abuses of civil liberties and human rights. The media in Bangladesh has been one of the most outspoken voices, exposing the activities of militant groups and the threat of terrorism, though its independence may sometimes be circumscribed by its reliance on the government for revenue. In addition, the multicultural history of the region of Bengal has generated a traditionally moderate and tolerant practice of Islam.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Despite high levels of corruption, the country has made considerable progress on a number of human development indicators.[70] This has been termed the "Bangladesh Paradox" by the World Bank, wherein steady economic growth has been achieved despite weak governance. Indeed, Bangladesh may join the ranks of middle-income countries by 2017.[71] The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) notes that poverty has decreased since 1991 from 59 percent to 40 percent, life expectancy has risen to sixty-four years from fifty-nine, child immunization is now widespread, and Bangladesh has made great strides in family planning.[72] The country is also making progress towards meeting a number of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, having achieved nearly 87 percent universal primary education and gender parity in primary education.[73] Its innovative micro-credit schemes are now being replicated throughout developing countries, having also earned their pioneer, Mohammed Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank, the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

In terms of cultural forces, Maneeza Hossain noted that "Bangladeshi society has sought to preserve its diverse cultural legacy and not succumb to the uniform vision espoused by the promoters of cultural radicalization."[74] Even Bertil Lintner, controversial for his early reports on radicalization in Bangladesh, notes that "the vast majority of Bangladeshis remain opposed to Shari'a law and other extreme Islamic practices."[75] Nationalism plays an important role in providing a counter-narrative to the militants' rhetoric. Memories of the 1971 independence war have helped foster a strong sense of national solidarity and a wariness of religious politics. Cultural practices that reinforce the patriotic narrative are powerful reminders of common values and a shared history. Among these practices is the celebration of festivals such as the Bengali New Year (*Pahela Baishakh*) and *Ekushey* (February 21st, now also recognized by the UN as "Mother Language Day"), which commemorates those who gave their lives to establish Bengali as a national language.

Civil-society organizations have been active in attempting to address governance, development, and security challenges. This includes organizations such as the Nagorik Committee and BRAC, which advance proposals for improving governance, and *Drishtipat*, *Ain o Salish Kendra*, and *Manusher Jonno*, which promote human rights. There are also groups such as the secular-nationalist Nirmul Committee and the Sector Commanders Forum who promote Bengali arts, culture, and history from a nationalist perspective. A link between political independence and cultural identity was articulated by artist Zainul Abeddin (1914-1976), who helped establish a foundation to preserve Bengali artistic traditions, arguing that, "now that Bangladesh had achieved an independent political identity, it should not lose sight of its

70 See for example, Foreign Policy, "The Failed States Index," 2008, available at www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4350&page=1 ; Transparency International ranked Bangladesh tenth from below in its 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index, see Transparency International Bangladesh (September 23, 2008), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2008: Bangladesh Ranked 10th from Below*, available at www.ti-bangladesh.org/CPI/CPI2008/CPI2008-Press_Release.pdf .

71 World Bank, "Bangladesh Paradox: Does Governance Matter to Growth?" 2009, available at http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/0,,contentMDK:21533535~menuPK:2246552~pagePK:2865106~piPK:2865128~theSitePK:223547,00.html .

72 UK Department for International Development (DFID), "The UK Government's Programme of Work to Fight Poverty in Bangladesh," 2009, available at www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications/Bangladesh-country-plan09.pdf ; also, President H. M. Ershad, in spite of his pro-Islamic policies, recognized the importance of family planning in a densely populated country like Bangladesh, and was recognized by UNFPA for his efforts in promoting family planning. See UNFPA, "United Nations Population Award: Award Laureates," 2009, available at www.unfpa.org/about/popaward/laureates.htm ; and Syed Serajul Islam, "Bangladesh in 1987: A Spectrum of Uncertainties," *Asian Survey* 28, No. 2 (February 1988), p.170.

73 Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United Nations in Bangladesh, "Meeting the Challenge: A Mid-term Report on Achieving MDG-1 in Bangladesh," July 2007, available at www.un.org/ecosoc/docs/stats/Chowdhury.pdf ; also UNDP, "MDGs and Bangladesh," August 17, 2009, available at www.undp.org.bd/mdgs.php .

74 Hossain, *Broken Pendulum*, p. 23

75 Bertil Lintner, "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh," in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, edited by Satu P. Limaye, Robert G. Wirsing, and Mohan Malik (Honolulu, HI: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), available at www.apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/ReligiousRadicalism/ReligiousRadicalism.htm .

cultural one."[76]

Several faith-based groups have also been working closely with the government and NGOs to promote interfaith dialogue and family planning, push for improvements in women's rights—including discouraging early marriage and the practice of dowries—as well as to promote HIV/AIDS awareness.[77] A senior academic in Dhaka called this a "brave new alliance" but also noted that it will need continuing support if it is to survive.[78] Nevertheless, these examples demonstrate the strong potential for constructive engagement between religious groups and the state.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The widespread and active participation of women in NGOs, public life, and the workforce is widely regarded as an important social force in promoting moderate social and religious practices in Bangladesh.[79] Indeed, one Indian civil-society activist lamented that this trend could not be replicated in rural India.[80] Though often hidden in the pages of long and technical development reports, there has been a "silent revolution" in the status of women in Bangladesh that was repeatedly highlighted in IPI's interviews. Examples include the emphasis placed by rural women on children's education, their use of birth control to manage family size, and their enthusiasm as voters.

Moreover, as a Bangladeshi financial analyst and entrepreneur noted, the success of microcredit across the country means that rural women have become important consumers in their own right. Manufacturers and retailers are taking note of their demands and designing their products accordingly.[81] NGOs like BRAC and Grameen have provided women the means to be self-employed and to develop income-generating skills, and have joined with the Bangladeshi government to develop

and support innovative programs like "nonformal" education for children, primarily girls, who would otherwise be left out of the education system.

In recent years, the increased visibility of veiling has led many to assume that women's independence may be declining in favor of support for militant religiosity. However, the question of identity in Bangladesh is complex and multifaceted; Bangladeshis may be personally pious and support religious groups in principle without condoning their use of terrorism or violence. Women in Bangladesh cited several reasons for wearing the veil, including fashion, privacy and hygiene on crowded and dirty streets, personal conviction, and rebellion against prevailing norms.

However, there is also a worrying trend emerging whereby women assert their power by emphasizing their role in supporting or encouraging jihad. For example, the wife of an *al-Qaida* operative, Malika el Aroud, declared that "It's the pinnacle in Islam to be the widow of a martyr… For a woman, it's extraordinary."[82] Reports suggest that the JMB is now targeting women in their recruitment drives, as women arouse less suspicion and can engage in community outreach efforts with greater access to families.[83]

POSITIVE POLITICS?

In the realm of politics, there are various positive forces at play to help counteract the negative ones described above. For example, a 1997 Peace Accord under the AL government brought an end to fighting in the CHT, though many worry that a failure to fully implement its terms may lead to renewed outbreaks of violence. The willingness of religious parties like *Jamaat-e-Islami* to engage in the political process, even at the expense of alienating some hard-line members, testifies to their recognition that democratic approval is vital

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76 IPI Interview, museum director, Sonargaon, December 2007.

77 IPI interviews, former member of the caretaker government and entrepreneur, Dhaka, February 2008; also senior cleric and imam, Dhaka, February 2008.

78 IPI interview, Professor and policy analyst, Dhaka, February 2008.

79 In a paper examining the role of development actors in contributing to countering violent extremism, Sarah Ladbury has argued however that women remain largely excluded from positions of public authority, therefore questioning their ability to serve as bulwarks against radicalization. Sarah Ladbury, "Developing the Evidence Base for Hypotheses on Radicalisation in Bangladesh, Final Report," independent report produced for the UK Department for International Development, June 27, 2008. Hard copy given to author.

80 IPI interview, Indian civil-society activist, New York, July 2008.

81 Discussions at meeting on "Untapped Investment Opportunities in Bangladesh," Asia Society, New York, January 24, 2008, further information available at www.asiasociety.org/business-economics/development/untapped-investment-opportunities-bangladesh .

82 Paul Cruickshank, "Love in the Time of Terror," *Marie Claire*, May 18, 2009, available at www.marieclaire.com/world-reports/news/international/malika-el-aroud-female-terrorist .

83 IPI interview, journalist, Dhaka, February 2009; also, for example, Mamunur Rashid, "Banned Huji, JMB Regrouping," June 22, 2009, available at http://nation.ittefaq.com/issues/2009/06/22/news0808.htm .

to their long-term success.

Critics have questioned whether groups like *Jamaat*, whose objectives include the transformation of the state and thereby the overturning of several constitutional provisions, should be allowed to participate in the political system. Others, however, have argued that as a pluralist democracy, Bangladesh needs to allow diverse perspectives and should be careful not to push religious parties underground. Prior to recent elections in December 2008, *Jamaat* complied with the requirements of the Election Commission by, for example, opening its membership to non-Muslims, demonstrating its capacity to adapt to legal requirements and electoral imperatives.

Additionally, innovative mechanisms in Bangladesh have facilitated peaceful transfers of power where they might otherwise not have been possible. The caretaker government (CTG) system was instituted in 1996 at the demand of the AL and its allies as a neutral facilitator for the electoral period, following the resignation of the outgoing government. Though many now question the necessity of such an interim mechanism, others argue that in January 2007, for example, it prevented widespread bloodshed and overcame a political standstill following the inability of political parties to agree on election processes.

Although the CTG is designed only to facilitate political transitions and is mandated to do so within three months, the military-backed CTG of technocrats in 2007-2008 initially met with widespread popular support and was given significant leeway during its tenure to promote policy reform.[84] Their initiatives focused on fighting corruption, establishing a level playing field for political participation by limiting campaign expenditure, empowering local government, and promoting civil-service reform and internal party democracy,[85] and securing the independence of the judiciary.[86] As one former adviser (minister) to 2007-2008 CTG observed, "Previous governments promised these reforms and passed the laws but were unable to implement them for political reasons. We're attempting to finish the job."[87]

However, the success of such measures will ultimately depend on medium- to long-term implementation. For example, as Transparency International noted, the CTG installed greater institutional capacity to combat corruption, but the real impact will be seen if such measures are sustained by subsequent governments.[88]

Many reform initiatives were also reflected in the election pledges of the incoming AL government. Among the top five priorities listed in their election manifesto were improving governance, including ensuring the independence of the judiciary; reform of the Electoral Commission and electoral mechanisms; and increasing the effectiveness and accountability of parliament and political leaders. The AL's manifesto even addressed concerns raised by Article 70, stating, "[e]xcept for some specific subjects related to the security of the state, members of Parliament will be allowed to express differing opinions."[89] Seeking to remove the stain of corruption, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina selected a new set of faces for her cabinet and also moved assertively to denounce the use of religion in politics, proposing a regional task force to address militancy and terrorism.

However, recent events also suggest a worrying return to old ways. Despite the successful national elections in December 2008, local elections in January 2009 were marked by low turnout and political violence.[90] Bipartisanship remains absent from parliament and parties have returned to

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84 In response to growing domestic and international concerns about widespread street violence and clashes that resulted in at least fifty deaths, the military stepped in and, with international support, it installed a CTG of technocrats headed by Fakhruddin Ahmed. The fact that it was backed by the military and ruled under emergency regulations was certainly controversial, but the CTG initially received strong support for a two-year mandate because frustration and disappointment with the deterioration of governance, law and order, and the political stalemate had reached an all-time high. However, later on concerns about the length of their tenure and the continuation of the state of emergency, combined with natural disasters and a global rise in food prices, contributed to increasing disillusionment with the CTG. Yet, the December 2008 elections held under the Fakhruddin Ahmed CTG were widely hailed as among the most successful in Bangladesh to date and saw the Awami League return to power with a landslide victory.

85 For example, the Election Commission and the CTG proposed that parties hold regular elections through secret ballot for office bearers, that presidency of the party be limited to two terms, and that ministers be barred from holding positions in party organizations.

86 Courts are vulnerable to politicization due to executive appointments of lawyers and officers, primarily in the lower courts. Higher courts have historically been more independent but this has been challenged in recent years as senior appointments are viewed as politically biased.

87 Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, as quoted in International Crisis Group, "Restoring Democracy in Bangladesh," Asia Report no. 158 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, April 28, 2008), p. 12, available at www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_asia/151_restoring_democracy_in_bangladesh.pdf .

88 Transparency International Bangladesh (September 23, 2008), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2008*.

89 Awami League election manifesto, 2008, available at www.bdnews24.com/vote-2008/?l=e&s=alm .

90 See for example BDNews24, "School Timings Changed, Except Dhaka," April 20, 2009, available at www.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=130603&cid=30 ; and

bickering about process rather than cooperating to move forward on meeting national needs. Both the BNP and *Jamaat* have been absent from parliamentary proceedings despite election pledges to bring an end to the culture of boycotts.[91] Reformers within the parties appear to have been sidelined and policymaking seems largely centered on partisan objectives rather than nationally debated issues. Though the elections were interpreted as a victory against militant Islamism, many have been disappointed at the AL's tepid espousal of secularism. Moreover, some fear that the BNP's future ideology will constitute a merger between "hyper-nationalism" and Islamism, so that, as one journalist explained, they will exploit strong nationalist sentiment to put forward Islamism as a vehicle for preserving Bangladeshi culture.[92]

Responding to the Challenge: What Role for National and International Actors?

Though terrorism and militancy in Bangladesh has not registered alarm on par with some regional neighbors, national and international actors have recognized the need to effectively combat the threat. However, the government of Bangladesh's response has been largely reactive, rather than preemptive, and constrained by resources and capacity limitations. This section will explore their response and the gaps therein which provide opportunities for engagement by international actors, with some recommendations for moving forward.

THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH'S RESPONSE

The government of Bangladesh has adopted a primarily reactive approach to counter terrorism within a law-and-order framework. They have come to rely on an elite force, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), comprised of members of the armed forces and the police. While they have

sometimes been credited by Bangladeshis with providing an effective response to spiraling law-and-order disturbances, critics argue that reported cases of extrajudicial killings and torture by the RAB undermine the very principles of the rule of law they seek to uphold.[93] Moreover, reports of human rights violations make it difficult for many international actors to provide support to law-enforcement and counterterrorism outfits like the RAB.

To date, Bangladesh does not have specific legislation to address terrorism and instead bases its prosecution of suspected terrorists on the Penal Code, under provisions for murder. Prosecutors and court officials often lack any specialization in addressing terrorism-related matters. There is no legislation specifically prohibiting the incitement of terrorism, as mandated by UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1624.[94] Law-enforcement agencies also suffer from a lack of resources in terms of both equipment and training, which hampers their ability to benefit from effective cross-border communications, checks at immigrations and customs entry-points, and sophisticated surveillance and intelligence-gathering technology. As a result the heavy-handed tactics of the military and RAB are cited as the most effective measures available to the government in addressing terrorism, despite criticisms of their human rights records.

Regional efforts to counter terrorism have mostly been channeled through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), though its record of implementation has been poor, largely due to sensitivities regarding sovereignty and nonintervention, and wariness of India's preponderance on the subcontinent. This has prevented SAARC from translating many of its declarations, treaties, and protocols into cooperative counterterrorism mechanisms and raised obstacles to bilateral and regional cooperation on issues like mutual legal assistance, extradition, and cross-border joint investigations.[95] In addition to a lack of political will to empower SAARC, the

Bangladeshnews.com.bd, "Upazila Polls Influenced," January 23, 2009, available at www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2009/01/23/upazila-polls-influenced/ .

91 Bangladeshnews.com.bd, "Forgotten JS Pledges," July 2, 2007, available at www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2009/07/02/forgotten-js-pledges/ .

92 IPI interview, Bangladeshi journalist and editor, Dhaka, February 2009.

93 See, for example, Roland Buerk, "Bangladesh's Feared Elite Police," December 13, 2005, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4522734.stm .

94 UN Security Council Resolution 1624 (September 14, 2005), UN Doc. S/RES/1624.

95 For a more detailed report on this subject, see Eric Rosand, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, and Jason Ipe, "Countering Terrorism in South Asia: Strengthening Multilateral Engagement," (New York: International Peace Institute, May 2009).

daunting development challenges faced by the region constrain the resources available to national governments for counterterrorism initiatives.[96]

Allegations of government complicity and even patronage of militant groups plagued the 2001-2006 government led by the BNP. Sheikh Hasina unequivocally accused them of carrying out the 2005 grenade attack on her and of supporting increased extremist activity in Bangladesh.[97] The BNP's initial denial of the problem, and the inclusion of Islamist parties in the governing coalition, was widely perceived as providing a cloak of impunity and protection for militant groups. Moreover, intelligence and law-enforcement officers reportedly expressed frustration at government inaction following reports they submitted on the evolving nature of the threat, ascribing subsequent inaction to government patronage of militant groups as tools against political opponents.[98] Indeed, as long as much of their activity was directed at leftist groups known as the *Sarboharas*, militants could count on the support of the political right and a large cross-section of the public. As a consequence, counterterrorism and law-enforcement initiatives have often been highly politicized and perceived more as political tools to reassert the authority of the ruling party than as national security imperatives with bipartisan support.

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS: SIX RECOMMENDATIONS

The interrelated nature of governance and violence in Bangladesh presents multiple entry points for engagement by Bangladesh's international partners. Moreover, the complex linkages between violence, politics, governance, and development in Bangladesh highlight the importance of a holistic approach to the implementation of international security and development assistance. They underscore the value of a broad "human security" approach that acknowledges not only traditional interstate security threats, but the negative impact

of disease, migration, underdevelopment, and the emergence of violent nonstate actors on individual security.[99] A broad-brush counterterrorism policy that fails to take into account these context-specific dynamics will not be effective in addressing the factors that create a permissive environment for terrorism and religious militancy.

The impact of international actors is constrained not only by the limitations on resources they can bring to bear, but more importantly by the willingness of the Bangladeshi political elite and leadership to transform the political culture and to follow through on initiatives that have already been agreed upon. This reflects a broad challenge for international actors, whose influence is relatively limited in Bangladesh. There is little outsiders can achieve without being able to influence the incentive structures that govern political behavior. For example, exhortations and appeals for constructive debate and cooperation among the parties in the run-up to the failed 2007 elections, and following the December 2008 elections, produced no tangible result. Numerous examples show that business has largely continued as usual with partisan bickering and parliamentary boycotts.[100]

One senior Western diplomat, who served in Bangladesh in the early 1990s, recalled that international partners had long been working with the political parties to improve internal democracy to little or no avail, given the absence of a real willingness to pursue change among the leadership.[101] Another senior international official remarked that the response of the "political classes" in Bangladesh to the CTG's initiatives seemed to be based on calculations of personal loss or gain, rather than a broader national interest.[102] Likewise, recognition of the terrorist threat appears to be heavily influenced by short-term political calculations.

The political leadership plays a particularly important role in determining the extent to which international cooperation can deliver tangible results. For example, Khaleda Zia's eventual action

96 Ibid.

97 Bangladesh Awami League, "The Grenade Attack on Sheikh Hasina: The Why and How of a Neutral Investigation," October 7, 2004, available at www.albd.org/autoalbd/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=79&Itemid=37 .

98 IPI interview, senior Bangladeshi-American academic, New York, July 2009.

99 For brief definitions of the term, see Human Security Centre, "What is Human Security?" 2005, available at www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=59 .

100 Daily Star, "Speaker Rejects Opposition Notices on Aila, BDR Issues," June 11, 2006, available at www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=92110 .

101 Discussion at roundtable conference, senior western diplomat, Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, Roundtable on Bangladesh, Washington DC, July 2008.

102 IPI interview, senior international official, Dhaka, February 2008.

against suspected terrorists did open the way for greater international cooperation in supporting Bangladesh's counterterrorism efforts. The apolitical nature of the 2007-2008 CTG made it open to international engagement on a series of issues. More recently, Sheikh Hasina's government has fostered a constructive and cooperative Indo-Bangladeshi relationship, strained under the BNP, which contributes to a positive environment for regional cooperation on numerous issues.

Consequently, initiatives put forward by international actors are unlikely to succeed in the absence of political will among key national stakeholders and the political elite in Bangladesh, or in the absence of widespread grassroots support. Therefore, international actors should ensure first and foremost that their interventions do no harm. Counterterrorism initiatives should be aligned as closely as possible with national priorities and developed in consultation with national stakeholders to promote greater ownership, effectiveness, and sustainability. Resources may need to be redirected from programs that have demonstrated little progress to areas for which there is political will among local and national leaders to support policy reform and project implementation. This may require sacrificing some objectives that are dear in principle but ineffective in practice, and redirecting resources where there is the greatest likelihood of success.

Development assistance aimed at improving governance, promoting human rights, and upholding the rule of law has broad implications for enhancing counterterrorism capacity in Bangladesh. For example, capacity-building initiatives for prosecutors, law-enforcement officials, and prison staff are important for the promotion of the rule of law, but also provide a robust institutional foundation to counter terrorism and address crime and political violence. Similarly, support for improved governance, poverty alleviation, education reform, and vocational training are vital to the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh,

but also contribute to mitigating the "conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism" identified by member states in the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.[103]

Outlined below are six recommendations for how international actors could support Bangladeshis in improving governance and strengthening the ability of the state and society to address terrorism and religious radicalization.

1. **Reinforce improved governance**, while being mindful of why past international efforts have failed to promote reforms. This should be done in a way that takes advantage of existing incentives for the ruling party and political elite, especially on issues where there have already been indications of a willingness to promote improvements. By leveraging such entry points, international partners may be able to expand their assistance to more intractable problems over time.

2. **Contribute to strengthening law-enforcement and counterterrorism capacity** in Bangladesh through the provision of resources for upgrading equipment and technical assistance in the security and judicial sectors. This might include support for increasing the transparency of trials; promoting increased accountability for law-enforcement officials to prevent extrajudicial violence; and training to promote a human rights approach to law enforcement and counterterrorism for all security services, especially those on the "front lines." In addition, support should be given to reform initiatives for prisons, including education and "deradicalization" programs to facilitate inmates' disengagement from violent extremist groups.

3. **Support the preservation of Bengali cultural traditions.** This offers another viable entry point for international engagement. Bengali national identity and its associated cultural traditions contribute to social cohesion and

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103 The findings of this paper support those put forward in a study commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to identify good practices of development assistance aimed at supporting counterterrorism capacity building in developing countries. Based on visits to Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mali, and Tanzania, the Danish study concludes that "as much as possible of the international assistance to building developing countries' counterterrorism capacity should be treated as part of development assistance to 'peace and security' and 'good governance' and therefore as part of the national development plan of the country." The report recommends that the principles included in the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*, which adopts several principles aimed at avoiding the unintended consequences of aid described above, provide an internationally accepted benchmark that should be as applicable to counterterrorism capacity building as it is to development assistance. Julian Brett and Finn Skadkaer Pedersen, with Erik Bryld, Suzanne Vedsted, and Erastus Wamugo, "Study to Identify Good Practices of Development Assistance in Support of Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building in Developing Countries: Country Studies from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mali and Tanzania," commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark, July 2008.

thereby offer a strong counterforce to violent radicalization and support for terrorism. Programs that support civil-society organizations, cultural associations, and artists to preserve and perpetuate these traditions could help raise awareness and understanding in Bangladesh and abroad about local traditions and practices that offer a counternarrative to the rhetoric of violent militant groups. Working closely with faith-based groups that have already demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the government and secular civil society to promote social causes could help build a powerful coalition against groups that promote violence.

4. **Promote socioeconomic advancement.** Persistent lack of development provides fertile ground for militant recruiters in Bangladesh. Poor administrative oversight encourages the emergence of unsupervised madrassas and unmonitored NGOs that may provide sub-par services and promote violent extremism. International actors could therefore prioritize assistance for education reform, which might include (a) streamlining Bangladesh's three education systems (Bengali public schools, English private schools, and madrassas) so that all students take a standardized secondary school exam; (b) supporting families that choose to send their children to secondary and higher education; (c) supporting initiatives to mitigate violence on student campuses; and (d) providing vocational training opportunities.

Ensuring the freedom of women and girls to pursue educational and employment opportunities is vital to social progress in Bangladesh. International actors could work with women and local civil-society organizations to promote counterradicalization programs at the local level and support initiatives to provide incentives for families to keep girls in school. One example of this is the government's program to provide stipends for girls enrolled in secondary education, which could be expanded to provide support for those women wishing to pursue university education or higher vocational training.

5. **Promote greater coordination among security and development initiatives** to ensure that these are mutually reinforcing. At present, there is little coordination among international embassies in Bangladesh or among the security and development priorities and programs promoted by each donor country. The connections among security and development interventions do not necessarily need to be made explicit, but international actors should be mindful of how they may impact one another and promote greater alignment between the two.

Within the UN system the Secretary-General could encourage the Country Team, which represents the world body on the ground, to adopt the holistic approach to addressing terrorism agreed to by all UN member states in the 2006 UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Country Teams should be encouraged to consider the impact of their development, governance, and rule-of-law-related activities on promoting counterterrorism on the ground, and to enhance their communications and engagement with the CTITF and CTED.

6. **Facilitate regional cooperation and support collaborative initiatives** to counter terrorism and crime. International actors could support efforts to strengthen regional mechanisms to counter terrorism, including joint technical capacity-building exercises, information-sharing among counterterrorism practitioners, agreements on mutual legal assistance and interstate law enforcement cooperation. Efforts that focus on technical cooperation among practitioners could enhance communication, cooperation, and exchange of best practices. Such cooperation could evolve over time towards a technical counterterrorism cooperation body for the region, complementary to SAARC. Alternatively or in addition, the UN could use its convening capacity to host meetings for regional practitioners, as recommended in a recent report on countering terrorism in South Asia by the International Peace Institute and the Center for Global Counterterrorism Cooperation in New York.[104]

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104 Rosand, Fink, and Ipe, "Countering Terrorism in South Asia."

Conclusion

Despite efforts to counter terrorism and radicalization in Bangladesh, reports of recent activity by militant groups suggest that the threat remains persistent, if not in ascendence. Responses by the government have been largely reactive rather than preventive, and have focused on the use of military measures ending in the incarceration or the execution of suspects. Moreover, countering terrorism has become increasingly politicized and perceived by some as a narrow party initiative rather than a broad national imperative.

The terrorist threat needs to be seen in the context of the political and social challenges facing Bangladesh. Increasing personalization of power, the politicization of the civil administration, and the confrontational and violent nature of politics indicate fragility within the system. Confidence in state institutions is eroding and religious radicalization is placing Bangladesh's social fabric under stress. These and other development challenges have created a permissive environment for the emergence of militant groups and terrorism. However, complete state failure or collapse remains a distant and unlikely outcome because of the many social and political forces which continue to promote a peaceful, democratic, and inclusive society.

International actors need to be mindful of these complex dynamics, the variety of actors involved, and the multifaceted nature of the terrorist threat when designing programs aimed at shoring up fragile states and addressing their security concerns. Pursuing narrow counterterrorism policies will not address the roots of the problem or the weaknesses that create an enabling environment for the threat to emerge and develop. Local interlocutors and the indigenous political elite are likely to be resistant to external overtures if these are perceived as negatively impacting their interests or national prerogatives, especially if they have vested interests in the existing system. Efforts to bolster the state must be balanced by initiatives to support the ability of civil society to hold the state accountable in order to guard against the pitfall of strengthening a predatory system.

Moreover, though development assistance should not be diverted for counterterrorism initiatives, there needs to be increased cooperation and information-sharing among actors in the development and security agencies of international governments and multilateral organizations. This is necessary not only to avoid the duplication of efforts but to allow key stakeholders to exploit synergies across various projects and provide a holistic approach to strengthening human security and development in Bangladesh.

The primary responsibility for strengthening the state and combating terrorism, militancy, and radicalization rests with the government and citizens of Bangladesh. However, international actors can play an effective role in supporting these efforts by better understanding the complex contexts in which terrorism and militancy thrive, and tailoring their engagement to better fit the specific opportunities and limitations presented by the domestic context.

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