

BANGLADESH TODAY

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BANGLADESH TODAY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bangladesh faces twin threats to its democracy and stability: the risk that its political system will founder in a deadlock over elections and the growing challenge of militant Islamism, which has brought a spate of violence. The issues are linked; Islamic militancy has flourished in a time of dysfunctional politics, popular discontent and violence. The questions of whether Bangladesh's traditional moderation and resilience will see it through or whether escalating violence and political confrontation could derail its democracy are vital ones. Serious instability in the world's third most populous Muslim country could not fail to have wider implications. The situation does not justify great anxiety about the outbreak of major conflict domestically or the nurturing of significant extremism and terrorism internationally but there are elements of fragility in the system which need close watching and engagement. The international community can help to address the graver risks but only if it takes Bangladesh seriously as a strategic partner and moves towards more mature political engagement.

It tends to be bad news that brings Bangladesh to world attention since it won independence from Pakistan, with India's assistance, in a brutal 1971 war. Apart from recurrent natural disasters, the list of worrying trends is lengthy: the non-functional parliament, entrenched corruption, a culture of violence, both political and non-political, weak judicial and law enforcement agencies, militant Islamic extremism and attacks on minorities, ethnic conflict, poor relations with neighbours, poverty, illiteracy and poor development indicators for women.

Most immediately, problems are multiplying in connection with the general elections, likely to take place in January 2007. Their conduct will rely on four institutions: the presidency, the head of the caretaker government charged with supervising the process, the election commission and the army. None of these is free of controversy; the president and chief justice (who will automatically lead the caretaker administration) are seen as partial to the governing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), while the chief election commissioner has damaged his credibility with a misconceived, and apparently politically biased, revision of the electoral roll. The army alone has kept a

low profile. But while it has done nothing to tarnish its image, its current reluctance to play politics could change if there is serious instability.

The leaders of the two main parties, the BNP and the Awami League (AL), are locked in mutual hatred that has paralysed parliament. The AL has good grounds for its complaints of victimisation: an August 2004 grenade attack on an AL rally in the capital nearly killed its president, Sheikh Hasina, and left other senior leaders dead or injured; other assaults include the murder of Shah A.M.S. Kibria, a respected former finance minister. There have been no serious investigations of these killings.

The AL, whose own record in government was marred by political violence and which has stalled parliament with a lengthy boycott, has adopted a confrontational strategy. Demanding reasonable benchmarks for free and fair elections, it has refused to negotiate with the BNP's Islamist coalition partner, the Jamaat-e-Islami, and threatens to pull out of the polls altogether. Although it won the largest share of votes in 2001 and hopes to benefit from an anti-incumbent swing, the first-past-the-post system means that much rides on the selection of allies and distribution of winnable seats. The BNP has the support of the religious parties and has strengthened its hand by persuading the Jatiya party of former military ruler General Ershad to join its alliance.

The principal beneficiary of these messy political equations has been the increasingly influential Islamist fringe, led by legitimate governing parties like the Jamaat but extending to the violently militant Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Circumstantial evidence, as well as cold political logic, suggests that underground terrorist groups have been cultivated and sheltered by those in power.

Although the government long denied there was a problem, a sharp escalation of violence in 2005 forced it to face up to a threat that was nearly out of hand. August 2005 saw more than 450 simultaneous bombings in every district of the country bar one; the explosions were small and casualties low but the scale of organisation rang alarm bells. The first apparent suicide bombings

took place in December 2005. Amid mounting domestic and international pressure, the government arrested senior militant leaders and hundreds of foot soldiers in March 2006. Islamist violence has dried up since then, suggesting that the state's action has brought results, but this may be only a temporary suspension, with sponsors of the militants worried that violence was becoming an electoral and diplomatic liability. The issues of foreign funding of extremism and the growing madrasa system outside of government regulation are concerns for the long term.

Increased militancy cannot simply be attributed to poverty. Indeed, on paper Bangladesh's economy is healthy, and the country is making impressive progress on development goals. There are other stabilising factors: a lively free media, vibrant civil society and NGO sector, a sophisticated electorate and a deep-rooted tradition of liberal secularism. Islam has always been an important strand of identity; that it has grown in significance since Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971 is neither surprising nor alarming. Offered a choice at the polls, Bangladeshis have consistently rejected religious extremism. Although the Islamists have gained in influence by manoeuvring themselves into government, they have not increased their share of the vote. The urgent challenge is for Bangladesh's political leaders to ensure that it is the people at large who get to shape the country's future, rather than a violent fringe filling the vacuum created by moderate parties' short-term self-interest.

For the international community, the challenge will be finding ways to support the workings of democracy. To do this, it needs to move relationships away from a focus on aid to a more active political engagement, insisting that the government meet standards in terms of human rights, elections and the reform of the security sector. Short-term counter-terrorism issues should not overwhelm the long-term issues of improving oversight of security forces, respect for human rights and ending the culture of impunity, particularly surrounding political violence. Improving democracy is the best guarantee against the growth of extremism.

Islamabad/Brussels, 23 October 2006

BANGLADESH TODAY

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh faces two interrelated challenges: conducting free and fair elections in an atmosphere of poisonous mistrust and containing a growing threat of militant Islamist extremism that has manifested itself in nationwide bombings and other violence.¹ The country rarely receives sufficient attention from policymakers and has had trouble shaking off the “basket case” tag with which it was born in the early 1970s; but it is large, strategically located and the world’s third most populous Muslim state.²

Some observers warn that Bangladesh is a fragile or failing state. It has featured as high as seventeenth in *Foreign Policy*’s global ranking of failed states, with the worst ratings for uneven development and criminalisation.³ World Bank Country Director Christine Wallich described it as a “fragile state”.⁴ Looking at rising levels of violence, the head of one major bilateral donor agency has warned that it displays the signs of “pre-conflict”.⁵ A respected Bangladeshi political scientist warns: “The red flag is up – we may not have reached the threshold but we could

cross it soon. The deterioration since 2001 is a serious change”.⁶ A Dhaka-based academic is even gloomier: “This is the worst time in the history of Bangladesh”.⁷

Although relatively small in area, Bangladesh is the world’s eighth largest country in terms of population. Famously dismissed by Henry Kissinger as a “basket case”, it has faced a constant struggle to survive. After the partition of India in 1947 and the inclusion of the present-day Bangladesh in Pakistan, it was severed from the major markets for its produce. Overcrowding exacerbated by recurring natural disasters reinforced the bleak economic view. But “the way Bangladesh deals with natural disasters shows competence, toughness and the strength of social fabric. Look at the 2004 floods: there were fewer than 1,000 deaths – most of them from drowning, not disease – and not a single riot”.⁸

This resilience extends to the political realm. Many Bangladeshi analysts reassure outsiders that the country’s innate preference for moderation, broadly secular political traditions and longstanding traditions of tolerance are an insurmountable obstacle for extremists. In this reading, institutionalised radicalism will never be able to change the national culture. Similarly, however disappointing democratic practice has been, it will not be uprooted by an extremist challenge.

The hypothesis is attractive and plausible but untested. There can be no guarantee that passive opposition – even of 90 per cent of the population – will necessarily be sufficient to resist a determined campaign by a well-organised fringe movement, even if small and unrepresentative. Bangladesh’s violent Islamists are not all crude terrorists: some have a detailed, patient long-term strategy that marries force and intimidation to a carefully crafted political plan. The big question is whether social and political institutions are resilient enough. “In 1971 (when the country won independence) we thought the job was done and went to sleep”, warns a secular academic. “But the Islamists didn’t – they carried on”.⁹

¹ Crisis Group has reported frequently on Islamists and Islamism and their relationship to a wide variety of political situations in the Middle East and North Africa, Central Asia, Afghanistan, South Asia and Southeast Asia. We treat Islamism as synonymous with “Islamic activism”, the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character, but which in turn, in its Sunni manifestations, has three very different streams, with very different implications for policy-makers: political, which seeks political power and normally eschews violence; missionary, which pursues conversion (*al-da’wa*); and jihadi, which pursues armed struggle. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.

² According to some counts, India has a larger Muslim population than Bangladesh but neither country’s census statistics are entirely reliable, especially when base figures are extrapolated in line with assumed population growth rates. In any case, Bangladesh’s position as the third-largest Muslim-majority state is unchallenged.

³ “The Failed States Index”, *Foreign Policy* and The Fund for Peace, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3098.

⁴ *The Daily Star*, 2 August 2005.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Dhaka, August 2005.

⁶ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, academic, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, academic, Dhaka, April 2006.

This report, based on extensive field visits and face-to-face interviews as well as secondary research, offers an overview of the political risks. However, a Bangladeshi political scientist cautions: “We have a very low base of general political knowledge to work with. A lot of our analysis is based more on personal gut feelings than on solid empirical evidence”.¹⁰ A Western development worker with many years’ experience in the country cautions against making firm predictions: “I’d bet [our ambassador] a year’s salary we would *never* have suicide bombers here – but I was wrong”.¹¹ “Can the Islamists seize state power?” asks one of the few academic experts on militancy. “No. Or rather, yes and no”.¹²

Accordingly, this report does not pretend to answer important questions with absolute certainty. However, it attempts to provide an analytical starting point by framing the right questions. There is plenty of worrying evidence on a number of fronts: the key question is whether it adds up to identifiable trends that can be extrapolated with some certainty to predict future scenarios. Much will depend on the choices made by key actors. As the arrests of extremist leaders from the main radical Islamist groups, the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) in early 2006 demonstrated, the government retains the capacity to act decisively when it wishes.

II. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

A. SURVIVING HISTORY

Bangladesh has had a turbulent history but it has tended to ride out troubled times better than most outsiders expected. The area that the country now encompasses has been dominated by Islam for centuries (unlike in much of South Asia, the religion was introduced by Sufi saints rather than Mughal conquest) but has maintained mixed cultural and religious traditions. The first partition of Bengal into a largely Hindu western part and Muslim eastern part by the British in 1905 was deeply unpopular and was reversed in 1911. After independence in 1947 the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan found themselves under a series of authoritarian military governments that tried to impose a top-down vision of Pakistani identity, using the Urdu language as one vehicle. Frustrated by their exclusion from power, Bengalis resisted and demanded greater autonomy, politically and economically, from their Pakistani rulers.

Economic and political grievances came to a head in 1971. Although East Pakistan had a larger population than the West, it was politically marginalised, its resources exploited by the West-based military government. When the Awami League (AL) of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Sheikh Mujib) won enough seats to form the national government in Pakistan’s first general elections in 1970, the military blocked it. The movement for provincial rights since 1952 became one for secession.

Bangladesh declared independence in March 1971 but it was only in December that Pakistani forces surrendered after a brutal civil war and Indian intervention in support of the freedom fighters. The war is still at the centre of politics; it is commonly believed three million died (though some estimates are one tenth that number). Most Bangladeshis have personal experiences of the terrible violence. The AL and its supporters describe themselves as “pro-liberation” and their foes as “anti-liberation”. Islamists, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami party (Jamaat), are often accused of siding with Pakistanis, joining in genocide and allegedly actively assisting massacres, especially targeted killings of intellectuals in Dhaka in the last weeks.¹³

The two principal leaders of the liberation movement set the pattern for politics to this day: when the first prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and much of his family

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹² Crisis Group interview, professor, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹³ The appropriateness of the term “genocide” is hotly disputed. As early as April 1971, U.S. officials in Dhaka protested their government’s support for West Pakistan and argued that “the overworked term genocide is applicable”. Telegram to the Secretary of State from Consul-General Archer Blood, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/BE888.pdf>.

were assassinated by army officers in 1975, his daughter Sheikh Hasina Wajid took over the AL; freedom fighter commander General Ziaur Rahman, popularly known as General Zia, emerged as military ruler and founded the BNP as his civilian front. When he in turn was murdered by army officers, the party was taken over by his wife, the current prime minister, Begum Khaleda Zia. Sheikh Hasina, who was travelling in Europe at the time, was one of the few members of her family to survive her father's assassination. She blames Khaleda Zia for continuing to protect the killers and – especially since the August 2004 grenade attack on an AL rally – trying to kill her and her supporters.

Under Sheikh Mujib the AL won a landslide victory in 1973 but his style rapidly turned authoritarian. He neglected institution building, attempting to establish one-party rule. From his death until the successful democracy movement of 1990, Bangladesh saw a succession of military governments dominated by General Zia and then General H.M. Ershad. Under military rule, parties could not develop into democratic institutions but were political vehicles for powerful individual leaders. With dubious legitimacy and limited popular support and facing demands for democratic functioning, the generals turned to Islamists to shore up their governments; those who had fought against Bangladesh's liberation were rehabilitated within the elite political system, although not necessarily with the electorate.

B. THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

Politics since independence has been forged in violence and political murders. Shortly after the assassination of General Zia, another military officer seized power. Lieutenant General Hussain Mohammed Ershad took over in March 1982, suspended the constitution and the following year assumed the presidency. Parliamentary elections in 1986 were boycotted by the BNP and won by Ershad's political vehicle, the Jatiya Party. In October 1986, he was easily elected president, as neither the BNP nor the AL fielded candidates. By 1990, the country was wracked with protests and Ershad was forced to step down, leading to elections in 1991. The BNP gained a plurality of seats and formed a government in alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Given their history of competition and confrontation, unsurprisingly politics was immediately dominated by the fierce rivalry between the two largest parties, the Khaleda Zia-led BNP and the AL led by Shiekh Hasina, with parliamentary boycotts, rigged polls and violence common and, increasingly, a "winner-takes-all" attitude dominating. While the BNP and the AL have dominated the democratic transition since 1990, they have failed to respect democratic norms and functioning, in government or in opposition. Since the concept of a "loyal opposition" has not taken hold, parliament is a weak, disabled institution. With power

increasingly centralised in both the government and the two main political parties, the judiciary's independence and the civil service's neutrality are undermined. Successive prime ministers have seen little need to seek consensus, leaving the opposition with the belief that it could make its points only through strikes and protests. Election results have been consistently rejected since 1994; and both sides have challenged the composition of caretaker governments installed ahead of polls, since the practice was introduced in 1996.

With parliament discounted, the parties have resorted to often violent means to unseat governments. Boycotts, general strikes and mass protests have become the normal tools of politics, leading to immense disillusionment among the public with the political process. While democracy has survived, and governments have changed through elections, the manner in which the electoral rules are now being contested, particularly the composition of the caretaker government, means that the political order could be destabilised further.

C. THE POLITICAL RIVALS

The two main political parties are often described in opposing stereotypes: the BNP is right of centre, middle class, urban, anti-Indian, pro-Pakistani, of an Islamic bent and generally favoured by the business community; the Awami League is left of centre, secular, pro-Indian, rural and favoured by farmers. While these descriptions are generally true, they disguise some realities. Both parties are highly personalised and centralised, revolving around the founding families and brooking no dissent to their views and interests. Neither is particularly ideological nowadays, and neither views policy development and implementation as central to their missions. Both are about power, often in its rawest forms. Both are widely believed to maintain links to criminals, who are used as enforcers, fundraisers and election mobilisers. The parties have also spread their networks across a wide swathe of institutions: civil society is increasingly divided, as is the media and civil service. There is very little non-partisan space. While the BNP is said to be the business party, most powerful and wealthy families maintain a foothold in both camps.

1. The BNP

Established by General Zia in 1978, the BNP has moved away from its origins in the military but is still seen as the more overtly nationalistic party, mostly because it takes a harder line against India. General Zia moved the country away from its secular nationalistic origins, establishing a more conservative state whose identity merged Bengali cultural aspects and Islam. The BNP favours closer relations with Muslim majority states and tends to view the AL as willing to compromise this Bangladeshi identity

through ties with India and secularism. Military governments under Zia and Ershad had close ties to the Pakistani military.

The BNP's conservatism has meant it has been mostly comfortable in alliances with religious parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, though the relationship is not always easy. BNP leaders maintain that JI is firmly under their control but critics believe the Jamaat is hollowing out the BNP and making it more religiously based. The BNP certainly suffers in some comparisons with the Jamaat, a Leninist-style party with generally disciplined and well-educated cadres who are not seen as corrupt. Religious minorities such as Hindus are suspicious of the BNP, which has targeted them in the past. Although Khaleda Zia's grip on the party remains strong, there are tensions as her son, Tareq Rahman, builds his own powerful base. Widely credited with crafting the 2001 election strategy, he and his advisers have become a second source of power within the party. When senior leaders criticised him in August 2006, they immediately faced calls from the national executive committee to resign.¹⁴

2. The Awami League

The AL was founded by Shiekh Mujibur Rehman to struggle for Bengali rights in Pakistan before the 1971 split. Its manifesto has long been based on four principles: nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy. Its brief time in power before it was overthrown by the military and Sheikh Mujib assassinated has left it with distrust for the military and the BNP. Like the BNP, it has opted for patron-client relationships rather than internal democracy.

Critical of the involvement of religious parties in government, the AL reminds voters of the role of groups like Jamaat in violence during the independence war. It has forged its own ties to religious parties in the past and is now linked to smaller, left-leaning parties. Despite attempts to groom her son Joy for office, Sheikh Hasina is unlikely to hand over the party in the near future. Her son has shown no great appetite to abandon his life in the U.S. and enter Bangladeshi politics, nor are there powerful anti-Hasina factions that might force an early retirement.

D. THE 2007 ELECTIONS

The last general election, which brought the BNP-led coalition to power, was in 2001. The next must be held by January 2007. General elections are overseen by a three-month caretaker administration meant to ensure government neutrality and a fair contest. This caretaker government must be appointed in October 2006. Apart from growing Islamist strength, the two mainstream parties' bitter rivalry

augurs ill for a smooth process. There is a history of violence around polls, and the approaching election may well trigger intensified confrontation.

The AL may boycott the election, particularly if it can make a strong argument that the choice of caretaker administrators, lack of accurate voter lists, poor security environment or other factors make a free and fair contest impossible. Bargaining within the governing coalition may result in a much strengthened Islamist core: the Jamaat is demanding up to 70 constituencies' seats in which it can run without contest from the BNP and other allies, and the Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ) also insists on increased representation.

AL protests about conditions are likely to include mass strikes and demonstrations, any of which could be a flashpoint for violence, especially if the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a well-equipped, feared government paramilitary force, is deployed. Recent months have seen a steady increase in clashes at demonstrations, some of which were party-political, others related to energy and resource issues. The key dispute will be over the post of chief adviser to the interim government, which is meant to go automatically to the former chief justice, K.M. Hasan. However, he is seen as biased in favour of the BNP, which appointed him, and so is unacceptable to the AL. Forced to respond to an unscheduled parliamentary debate about him, Law Minister Moudud Ahmed admitted Hasan had been involved in BNP politics and was a party member in 1979 but insisted this did not affect his professional integrity.¹⁵

The stage is set, therefore, for bitter bargaining and possibly violent clashes over electoral procedures. A failure to break the deadlock over the most contentious issues could derail the election altogether. Even a technically successful election would not in itself address the longstanding exclusion of women and ethnic and religious minorities from the political process.

Much current discontent is focused on shortages of electricity, water, fertiliser and diesel fuel, which will fuel the traditional anti-incumbency vote but may obscure underlying issues. A fundamental shortcoming is that there are too few avenues to channel broad discontent constructively in an environment where the mainstream parties are widely discredited and rigidly hierarchical, with no policy input from lower levels. The familial structures of the BNP and the AL stimulate dissatisfaction both within and beyond the parties. Complaints abound of patronage and corruption, of politics as a business in which short-term tactical and financial considerations

¹⁴ "Young leaders ask BNP to ditch senior rebels", *The Daily Star*, 27 August 2006.

¹⁵ "KM Hasan was involved in BNP politics", *The Daily Star*, 21 September 2006.

outweigh any sense of duty to the nation or its citizens. With the mainstream parties widely seen as myopically obsessed with short-term self-interest, the Jamaat has benefited by portraying itself as a clean party, disciplined and relatively meritocratic.

E. ISLAMIC RADICALISM AND TERRORISM

Fears over the Islamisation of Bangladesh, and the possible knock-on effects of domestic terrorism and regional destabilisation, have emerged more intensely outside the country. Concerns grew in the West particularly following the events of 11 September 2001 and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. Helped by dramatic media reports, Bangladesh quickly came to be seen as a weak state harbouring international Islamic terrorists. *Time* magazine, for example, warned in October 2002 that the arrival of 150 Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters from Afghanistan in December 2001 “raises pressing concerns that Bangladesh may have become a dangerous new front in America’s war on terror”.¹⁶

In 2002 there were also unconfirmed reports that Osama bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had entered the country from the port of Chittagong and stayed for some months. This was followed by an alleged plot to make a radioactive “dirty bomb”: on 30 May 2003 police arrested four suspected JMB members with a small amount of Kazakh uranium and, reportedly, bomb-making instructions. The village where they were arrested, reported *Time*, “is known as an area with al-Qaeda sympathies”.¹⁷ Alarm about “Talibanisation” (a phrase popularised by Sheikh Hasina) has also been fanned by the media in India, which shares a 4,000-km. frontier with Bangladesh and has particular fears about cross-border terrorism and destabilisation.

A creeping process of Islamisation is indeed underway, some of it channelled deliberately by political organisations with long-term agendas to transform Bangladesh into a strict Islamic state. Their efforts appear to be helped, at least indirectly, by an inflow of Gulf funding for madrasas, mosque construction and Islamist development efforts, as well as a longstanding subsidy for petroleum imports. The moderate majority has not actively resisted Islamist encroachment: “The ‘tolerant mass’ *hasn’t* been making headway against extremists, despite its huge size. This is partly out of fear (moderates don’t want to put themselves at risk), but also because they are disillusioned with politics in general”.¹⁸

However, there are mixed messages. More burqas may be worn on the streets of the capital and rural towns but the backdrop is still one of garishly painted movie posters and ever more revealing advertisement billboards. Money from the Gulf is not necessarily as nefarious as some claim. Much of it is for useful social work, including basic education. The disturbing aspects are that Gulf-funded madrasas are completely beyond state control or regulation, and some development projects are clearly designed essentially as Islamist party-building efforts.

F. COUNTERVAILING FORCES

Bangladesh’s problems are not new, even if the worrying trends merit increased attention. When the AL was in power from 1996 to 2001, there were also bombings, political instability and a non-functioning parliament. Dire predictions of political collapse in the run-up to the 2001 elections proved wrong. It is also worth remembering that the AL was willing to deal with Jamaat to a limited extent; both main parties have electoral self-interest at heart. Weak as Bangladesh’s institutions are, there are no signs of imminent state failure, and there are many reasons to be less than pessimistic about the future.

The economy. There is economic progress and overall stability, even following the end of the Multi-Fibre Agreement, which governed the global trade in textiles and garments from 1974 to 2004. The currency has been successfully floated, and Bangladesh relies little on foreign aid, although it is still dependent on loans. There is a domestic culture of entrepreneurship, and the growth in overseas employment, while far from ideal, has injected cash remittances into the economy. Some growth, albeit not enough, has happened in rural areas, and there has been reasonable investment in basic infrastructure.

Social development. Education is expanding and across the board there is good progress towards the UN Millennium Development Goals. Bangladesh ranks 139 of 177 countries on the Human Development Index of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), below all others in South Asia¹⁹ But this does not tell the full story. Women are much better off than in Pakistan, and conditions have been improving. There is a strong NGO sector working in all areas of social development as well as basic service delivery. Grameen Bank, winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize along with its founder Muhammad Yunus, is recognised globally as the pioneer in microcredit; other large NGOs are using their expertise abroad. For example, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has major projects in

¹⁶ Alex Perry, “Deadly cargo”, *Time Asia*, 21 October 2002.

¹⁷ Alex Perry, “A very dirty plot”, *Time Asia*, 16 June 2003.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁹ Human Development Index for 2005, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indicators.cfm?x=1&y=1&z=1>.

Afghanistan – one of the best examples of South-South cooperation that is often hoped for and rarely achieved.

Media and civil society. Bangladesh has a fairly free, very lively media, though it is a dangerous country for journalists. There is a culture of debate and discussion but the media is under-developed and there is considerable self-censorship, not least because of the risks of violence against journalists.²⁰

Secularism. Secularism is embedded in the constitution and most mainstream parties. Bangladeshis tend to place great importance on religion in personal, family and community life without making it a defining feature of their political identity or view of the nation. “Even now there are no violent protests at the [Danish] cartoons so we’re certainly better off than other Muslim countries, certainly better than in Pakistan, where various types of violence are happening”.²¹

Basic political stability. While the political system has many failings, the hard-won democracy of 1990 has not collapsed entirely. There have been three full-term parliaments and two peaceful transfers of power. Attempts to rig elections have not succeeded, and results have broadly reflected the popular will. Despite some disillusionment, people still believe in the democratic process.

Sophisticated electorate. Bangladesh has a long history of activism and mass involvement in politics. Election turnout is high, and voters monitor the performance of those they elect. “People here are amazing”, comments a Western diplomat. “They’re all so political, so aware and offer sharp analysis – very mature and well developed, so much more than in London, New York or Paris. The electorate obviously cares about what’s going on: that’s encouraging”.²²

Capacity to act. The March 2006 arrests of senior militant leaders showed that the government can still act decisively when it chooses to. But this is not the only example. In 2005, Bangladesh was under great pressure to combat human trafficking, for which it had one of the highest global rates. A donor official who worked closely on the issue with the government recalls, “I wasn’t optimistic at all. But there *was* real change – I think because they were really embarrassed at the image and because it was their own citizens being sold. So they responded positively and systematically”.²³

III. FROM DYSFUNCTIONAL POLITICS TO RADICALISM

A. WEAK INSTITUTIONS

Parliament. Since the advent of democracy in 1990, free and fair elections have been held, and governments have changed more or less peacefully. But with governments refusing to cede their parliamentary opponents their due role and parliamentary oppositions refusing to accept the legitimacy of elected governments, parliament has been through lengthy periods of complete dysfunction with the opposition boycotting sessions. Parliamentary oversight committees have not been able to develop into fully operative parts of the democratic process.

Judiciary. There is residual respect for the courts and senior judges, not least those who have successfully steered caretaker governments in past general elections, and some things may have improved in recent years: “there [have] been...more speedy trials but cases are taking even longer at the appeals level”.²⁴ However, the judicial system as a whole does not command much confidence. An AL activist says: “The judicial system is not independent but even the AL will not change this – it’s our political culture”.²⁵ Judges and lawyers favouring the BNP are being preferred and promoted. “Just a few months back a senior judge in Bogra was transferred to a junior position in the most distant part of the country for not giving a judgement in favour of the government”, complains a senior lawyer, “and public prosecutors must be a member of the ruling party regardless of their capability”.²⁶

A lawyer who champions unpopular causes said: “The judicial system is not working, is not impartial – it just follows what the political leaders want. I haven’t received any direct threats but I’ve had lots of problems and indirect threats. I feel very insecure”.²⁷ Moreover, the courts are now a specific target of jihadis who have put the introduction of Sharia law at the top of their agenda, and many lawyers have been targeted by militants.

Civil service. The quality of the senior civil service has deteriorated, and impartiality has been eroded.²⁸ Decades of interference have left the bureaucracy weakened and politicised. “Look at the former home secretary – now known to be a card-carrying member of the Jamaat”.²⁹ “In the four years after the 2001 elections, five deputy commissioners

²⁰ See Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) letter to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, available at <http://www.cpj.org/protests/051trs/Bangla22mar05pl.html>; and report on Bangladeshi journalism, available at <http://www.cpj.org/attacks04/asia04/bangla.html>.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

²² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

²³ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

[the highest district-level officials] were transferred for not supporting the government enough. The one who helped fix the election left with a promotion. Two of his successors were good but not obedient enough; now the current one has no backbone".³⁰ "The civil service is being politicised but now they're behaving a bit neutrally just in case there's a change of government after the elections".³¹

The civil service is not overstaffed; if anything, there are too few seasoned, senior people.³² "The Public Service Commission [responsible for recruiting civil servants] has lost the trust of the people entirely".³³ "The bureaucracy has been a real disappointment. It used to be that a secretary had a backbone, could say to a minister 'that's a dumb idea'. Now even if there are a few good ones, they'll be tainted by association if there's a change of government".³⁴

Civil society. Civil society is vibrant and active in many areas but it, too, is riven by party rivalries, and truly independent organisations are few and far between. Even those that may be neutral are often accused of political bias. In the run-up to the elections, prominent civil-society members may be tempted to engage in partisan politics. For example, the founder of the Grameen Bank, Muhammad Yunus, has joined with BRAC and other organisations to promote a "competent candidate" movement that some analysts believe might undermine both the BNP and AL.³⁵ Journalists and political analysts greeted the August 2006 launch of an NGO Election Working Group backed by the Asia Foundation with some scepticism.³⁶

Local activists are particularly vulnerable to threats and intimidation: "I don't know why civil society is sleeping: there are no protests despite so many incidents [of attacks on minorities]. Maybe they're feeling insecure. If they protest, they may also be tortured and they won't be protected".³⁷ Furthermore, the growth in the donor-funded NGO sector, while encouraging, has contributed to a weakening of government capacity and popular legitimacy.

Local administration. Local elected leaders have few resources and powers. While the village-level Union Parishad is somewhat responsive, "there is no other level of local government where the...bureaucracy can work under

the control of elected representatives".³⁸ Members of parliament and line ministries tend to meddle in local development and relief initiatives.³⁹ Central government officials struggle to retain as much control as possible over local budgets, targeting of assistance and donor contributions.⁴⁰ Real influence is wielded not by the cabinet but by a much smaller group around Khaleda Zia: "All power is centralised in the prime minister's office. That's where the decisions are made, especially by this government, and especially for high-priority sectors such as energy and primary education – in the name of priority...but the result is the opposite".⁴¹

B. CORROSIVE CULTURES

Political culture has been corroded by the personal enmity between the BNP and AL leaders and the corruption, criminality and organised violence that have become an integral part of politics. This has taken place in a wider context of consistent human rights violations and exclusion from power of marginalised groups.

Mainstream enmity. Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina are not on talking terms; their parties are locked in a bitter struggle they consider a zero-sum game. "The confrontation between [the] two leaders is worse than ever", observes the head of a major NGO.⁴² Lack of communication at the top has undermined parliament and blocked consensus even on issues of common interest. Still, rivalry does not cripple all cooperation. A pro-AL college lecturer relates that "our college founder is an AL leader, and our current parliamentarian is from the BNP, and a minister as well. But still he's helped our college – financially, morally and in other ways. He used to be a lecturer in a government college himself".⁴³ Pragmatism still holds for many: "Sure, the AL and BNP are bitter rivals but it's been quite normal for families to keep a foot in both camps", says a member of a prominent AL family. "There are marriages between supporters of the two parties, and businesspeople always want to keep channels open on either side. That's still the case – if it starts to change we'll know things are really deteriorating".⁴⁴

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

³² Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

³³ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, political analysts and journalists, Dhaka, April 2006.

³⁶ "Question mark hangs over credentials of some polls observers", *The Daily Star*, 11 August 2006.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

³⁸ Abu Elias Sarker, "The Illusion of Decentralisation: Evidence from Bangladesh", *The International Journal of Public Sector Management* 16 (7), 2003, pp. 523–548.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews with local government officials and residents, Bogra, November 2005.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, local officials and donors, Bogra and Dhaka, November 2005.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Dhaka, November 2005.

Corruption, governance, criminality and violence.

Bangladesh is regularly one of the worst performers in Transparency International's index of public perceptions of corruption.⁴⁵ A college lecturer says: "We have a large population and high pressure to succeed. So many people are tempted into illegal activities – even as basic as cheating in exams – to boost their chances".⁴⁶ Entering politics early is a way of boosting career prospects: "There is no official student politics on our campus but most students are involved. It gives them some power, some experience. And if they play it well, it can help to build their career".⁴⁷ Still, corruption cannot be laid solely at the parties' feet: "Politicians are the pioneers but all others are also involved".⁴⁸

An economist identifies a deeper structural problem: "Criminalisation involves four constituencies: bureaucrats, politicians, military bureaucracy and business community. These used to be more or less separate but look at the marriage patterns in the 1980s – they created webs of kinship across these groups. And economic criminalisation has increased the effective demand for political criminalisation".⁴⁹ These trends have embedded violence as an essential political tool. "Politics has gone to "M and M": money and muscle", observes a senior lawyer. "Apart from these, nothing else counts. I've been in politics for decades but only indirectly, with no chance of standing. People with education and honesty are kept out".⁵⁰ There is extremely low tax collection: most taxes are indirect, and 70 per cent of all income tax comes from ten or eleven payers.⁵¹

Little respect for basic rights. The constitution enshrines fundamental rights but the state has a poor record of safeguarding rights, particularly in regard to minorities. The impunity accorded violent Islamists is less surprising when viewed within the established climate of tolerance for rights violations, especially against women and religious and ethnic minorities. A promised National Human Rights Commission has still not been set up, and human rights activists continue to face harassment and attacks. Bangladesh is dangerous for local journalists, especially those who investigate the nexus between politics, crime and militancy. A prominent rights defender paints a bleak picture:

We human rights activists have been playing the role of "doomsayers". We named Bangla Bhai as the problem in northern Bangladesh, and we were castigated as troublemakers. All sides equally hate us, though especially those in power. At no other point in history has the state been such a blatant rights abuser as now – and the lines between underground and above ground are so blurred".⁵²

Chronic rights problems include:

- Minorities. Bangladesh's Hindu ethnic minority and Ahmadi communities are victims of chronic state discrimination and increasing targeted violence by Islamist groups. "No one will reveal the true statistics for minorities in the country", complains the district president of a minority organisation, the Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council. "In so many government departments there's less than 3 per cent minorities, in others less than 1 per cent. But we demand at least 20 per cent".⁵³
- Chittagong Hill Tracts. The army has long been fighting a counter-insurgency campaign against Chakma ethnic rights activists in the Chittagong hills of the south east. Although the AL government agreed to a peace deal, it has yet to be fully implemented by the ruling BNP, and the army's operations have left it with a reputation for brutality and lack of accountability.⁵⁴
- Burmese Refugees. Approximately 22,000 Muslim Rohingyas have been living in miserable conditions in camps near Cox's Bazaar since 1992 when they fled Burma. There are numerous reports of police harassment and beatings, and in earlier years, stories of involuntary repatriation were common.⁵⁵
- "Stranded Pakistanis". These are non-Bengali Muslims, largely Biharis, who moved to East Pakistan during India's 1947 partition. Some had accepted Bangladeshi citizenship after independence; other refused to give up their Pakistani nationality. Of the latter, some have been repatriated to Pakistan, but most (about 300,000) remain in camps in Bangladesh. Pakistan has suspended the process of repatriation, and poor living conditions were made worse when the Bangladesh government stopped subsidising camp food supplies in January

⁴⁵ Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Indices are available at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2005. In 2005, Bangladesh and Chad tied for last position; in 2004 Bangladesh and Haiti were in joint bottom position.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, academic, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁵⁴ See "Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts" and "Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Call for Justice at Mahalchari", Amnesty International, February 2000 and March 2004 respectively.

⁵⁵ See "Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: The Search for a Lasting Solution", Human Rights Watch, August 1997.

2004. Some half of the Biharis have started to integrate into local communities.

- Gender inequity. Compared to some other developing countries, not least the mother country, Pakistan, Bangladesh has much to be proud of in terms of women's rights. Female literacy is improving, as are fertility rates and other social indicators. But activists complain that many of these achievements are superficial and mask continued efforts to deprive women of meaningful social, economic and political power.

C. SUSPECT SECURITY SECTOR

1. Police

The 108,000-strong police force has a poor record on crime control and is seen as closely linked to gangster networks (*mastaan*), extortion and systemic graft. Police are widely considered corrupt and ineffective, although they have had some successes, for example in reducing acid-throwing attacks on women. Poorly paid, they depend on low-level extortion to make a living and are a crucial part of the network that funnels the proceeds up to political masters. The police are also poorly trained and equipped, with weak internal disciplinary mechanisms. There is no community policing or human rights training; officers operate with impunity, constrained primarily by the interests of their political masters. Their lack of credibility makes people reluctant to share information with them, a critical weakness common to all the security forces.

Reform efforts have been discussed and attempted (including with donor help, for example from the UK's Department for International Development) but fundamental change will take time and effort. A study by a human rights group in 2003 found that most officers, especially lower ranks, work for long hours in stressful and sometimes dangerous conditions for poor rewards: a constable at the top pay grade earns less than \$50 per month.⁵⁶ And "in the face of criminals who move around with...sophisticated weapons like AK-47s and mobile phones, the police have to use .303 rifles and antiquated wireless sets. Training...is often irrelevant".⁵⁷ Improvement in police behaviour will require a serious investment in reorienting the force, ending the climate of impunity and building both a new ethos and new skills.

2. Paramilitaries

Because of the police's poor reputation, the creation of a new paramilitary force dedicated to tackling organised crime, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) met with widespread approval.⁵⁸ From a standing start in mid-April 2004, it now includes twelve regional battalions (four based in Dhaka) support by intelligence, forensics and air support wings. It answers directly to the home ministry and has drawn most of its officers from the armed forces, some from the police.⁵⁹ According to official statistics, by 31 July 2006 it had made almost 11,000 arrests, including of five "top terrorists" and 419 "other terrorists", and killed 283 people in "exchanges of fire".⁶⁰

The many deaths explained as having taken place "in crossfire" is not surprising: RAB's popularity is partly founded on its unashamedly macho image and the implicit promise that it will mete out instant justice on the streets, when the judicial system has failed to act. Its website features a dramatic graphic dominated by an officer in the trademark black uniform, black bandana and sunglasses, holding a gun; the slogan is "War against Terrorism". "RAB is very worrying", comments an international observer. "There is no doubt that it is involved in extrajudicial killings. And not a single Islamist has died in crossfire".⁶¹ Suspicions over RAB's choice of targets are widely shared: "RAB was created partly to kill terrorists but has also been killing some good people. It's interesting that members of the Jamaat or BNP are never killed by RAB".⁶²

As most RAB personnel (some estimate as many as 90 per cent) were drawn from the military, they have maintained an intimate relationship with former colleagues. This can be an operational advantage: "RAB is close to the army and has access to some of its sources of intelligence – they know what's going on better".⁶³ But for those working to strengthen an impartial and accountable judicial

⁵⁸ Other paramilitary forces include the Bangladesh Rifles (a 30,000-strong border force), the Bangladesh Ansars (some 20,000 armed guards), Village Defence Parties (with, in theory, 64 members in every village) and a National Cadet Corps. All answer to the home ministry, although the Bangladesh Rifles is commanded by seconded army officers and all paramilitary units operate in support of the army during national crisis or war.

⁵⁹ RAB's director-general, Mohammed Anwarul Iqbal, is a career police officer; Additional Director-General Chowdhury Fazlul Bari is a brigadier-general who was commissioned into the army's artillery corps and later served in the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles border force, the military police and intelligence units. Biographical details of other senior officers are available at <http://www.rab.gov.bd/history.html>.

⁶⁰ Available at <http://www.rab.gov.bd/arrestnother.html>.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, AL district member, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁵⁶ "Police Reform in Bangladesh: An Agenda for Action", *Odhikar*, 2004.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

system, RAB appears to be little better than a licensed vigilante outfit with no need to account for its excesses.

3. Army

Despite a history of military rule, Bangladesh's armed forces do not seem keen to interfere directly in politics for the time being. The army (the most powerful force) has plenty of quiet influence behind the scenes, generous budgets and social respect. It also benefits financially and in international prestige from its role as a prime contributor to UN peacekeeping missions – something it would be loath to put at risk.⁶⁴ As the army has historically been the major power player in Bangladesh, it is impossible to write off the possibility that it might at some time seek a centre-stage role. A businessman close to the AL confirms that “the AL leaders really do fear the army stepping in. The army's not as unwilling as some people think”.⁶⁵ There are also hints that Islamisation may be taking place. One observer commented: “It seems our officers don't drink any more. Even with their current links to the mullahs, the Pakistanis still drink – so is our army becoming more and more religious?”⁶⁶

Most observers tend to be more sanguine, noting that the army's behaviour will depend on its interests. A well-placed international analyst says: “I think concern about the army is justified, although signs that it is really anti-AL are exaggerated, and there's no way it will jeopardise its reputation, especially for UN peacekeeping operations”.⁶⁷ A diplomat concurs: “The army may still be politicised but peacekeeping operations are *so* important to them that they're not going to risk losing them. And mid-level officers don't appear to want any part in fighting election violence”.⁶⁸

In the short term, fears are focused less on a possible coup by a nationalist military that remains suspicious of the AL's softer line on India, than on tacit assistance to the BNP-led coalition, especially in the run-up to elections. The army reports to the president, who is unlikely to be impartial. AL activists at all levels say they “need a neutral caretaker government and need to have the army

under the caretaker government, not under the president, who is appointed by the current government”.⁶⁹

Whether it is keen or not to take it on, the army does have a role in ensuring electoral security. It would be unlikely to stand by if there were serious instability.⁷⁰ An observer warns:

Violence [during the elections] will depend on whether the government accepts the AL proposals on the caretaker government and especially on whether the army is neutral. It is tilting towards the BNP, of course – if there is scope to play a role for the BNP they will. Some officers have been promoted *very* rapidly. Young guys are making brigadier-general, major-general...thanks to their connections with the BNP...[at] the age of 42 or 43 rather than in their late 40s. The army and RAB have also done illegal things so they need protection.⁷¹

D. MAKING SPACE FOR RADICALS

If Islamic militancy has prospered in Bangladesh, it is as much thanks to the deficiencies and self-interested behaviour of mainstream parties as to the strengths of radical groups.

Islamist parties have gained ground by appearing more professional and disciplined than the major parties. A politically active teacher says: “I vote AL because its first rule is secularism, and I like it. But I'm not happy with the AL, BNP or other parties' political activities. The leaders are no good – though it's not just their fault but our people's”.⁷² The mainstream parties' failure to manage basics has eroded public confidence and encouraged a turn to more extreme groups that seem better organised. A diplomat says: “There's a big Bangla pride but sadly a lot of – indeed, growing – disillusionment. There are plenty of people with ideas and moral values but that doesn't get translated into politics. And a huge potential, especially with natural resources, that's not being used”.⁷³

Successive governments have been reluctant to crack down too hard on militants, especially if they enjoy

⁶⁴ Participation in peacekeeping operations has certainly helped educate the army but it still carries out abuses with impunity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Rights workers insist that it must strike individual soldiers off the peacekeeping list if they commit abuses at home. Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, businessman, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Dhaka, August 2005.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, AL district member, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁷⁰ The Election Commission Act 1972 authorises the army to assist that body in conducting free and fair elections. The Election Commission normally covers the cost of army security, and troops are generally deployed for a few days. “Assistance in Conducting Election”, Bangladesh army, at <http://bangladesharmy.org/newahq/index5.php?category=80>.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

some protection through relations to powerful national figures. This complaint is typical:

Lakshmipur, ten kilometres west of here, is the main point where [militants] organised. In early 2005 some militants were arrested there with arms and ammunition but they were later released with the help of the police. They were being held under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure – preventative detention.⁷⁴ Then the government, administration and police all helped them get out. All the government offices are under the remote control of politicians and have to do their will.⁷⁵

Mainstream politicians, AL as well as BNP, have cultivated radical Islamists when it has been in their interests. The AL persuaded the Jamaat to join the boycott of the BNP's February 1996 elections and has been willing to deal with it on other occasions. For the BNP, its association with Jamaat and IOJ gives useful Islamic cover for a party whose leadership, not least Khaleda Zia herself, is often seen as too secular to attract Islamist votes.

IV. THE ISLAMIST AGENDA AND ITS PROPONENTS

A. THE AGENDA

1. The attractions of Islamism

Islam is an element of most Bangladeshis' personal identity and of the country's distinctiveness. The development of a national Bangladeshi identity distinct from an ethnic Bengali identity has been a complex process since independence, one driven most aggressively during periods of military rule. While military rulers have been most ready to cultivate Islamist support, the most prominent secular leaders have also contributed when it suited them. Sheikh Mujib, despite his secular instincts, used religious phrases in his speeches and banned un-Islamic activities such as horse-racing.⁷⁶ In its 2001 election manifesto, the AL pledged not to enact legislation contrary to the Koran and to establish a Sharia bench in the Supreme Court. Major steps took place under Generals Zia and Ershad, for whom the endorsement of Islamists offset lack of democratic credentials. Zia revised the constitution to remove the commitment to secularism and lifted the ban on religious parties; Ershad "went a step further and declared that Islam would enable Bangladesh 'to live as a nation with distinct identity'".⁷⁷

However, the emergence of more radical Islamist militancy has caught many off guard. The older generation that fought for independence in 1971 still find it hard not to view the Jamaat as beyond the pale for having sided with the Pakistani military and for its role in wartime atrocities. That it has managed to rehabilitate itself at all strikes Bangladeshi analysts as impressive, depressing, or both. "Jamaat has rehabilitated itself because of the lack of strong pro-liberation forces...the AL and BNP started the process, saying that 'we are Muslim first'".⁷⁸

The rise of Islamist parties, however, is underpinned by demonstrable attractions and strengths. Islamist parties, in particular the Jamaat, are seen as being much cleaner than the mainstream parties. They have been active in building support bases through work in local communities, including interest-free Islamic microcredit programs and other schemes, such as providing water pumps, that are aimed at those close to the poverty line. Their social policies are restrictive in many respects but appear more progressive in others: for example, their opposition to the dowry tradition is seen by many young people as

⁷⁴ Section 54 does not specifically authorise preventative detention but is widely criticised as encouraging abuses. See Odhikar, "Abuse of Section 54 of The Code of Criminal Procedure", a study of its use in 2000-2001, available at http://www.odhikar.org/pub/Pub3_1.htm. Amnesty International has warned that "Section 54 facilitates torture in police or army custody"; see "Bangladesh: Time for action to protect human rights", press release, 16 May 2003.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁷⁶ Sreeradha Datta, *Bangladesh: A Fragile Democracy* (Delhi, 2004), p.20.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

part of “a very strong social agenda”.⁷⁹ A focus on education has also won new supporters. The founding of madrasas is both a traditional good deed worthy of social respect and a concrete service to communities poorly served by the state education system.

These agendas are helped by the fact that many Islamists are seen, even by their critics, as more dedicated, driven and effective than mainstream politicians. They offer an alternative to the dynastic politics of the two major parties and also appeal directly to a small minority who are sympathetic to the idea of an Islamic state and whose support for Islamist parties is an informed choice.

2. No black and white picture

Even the nationwide Islamist organisations are not homogenous. Local factors can be as significant for their spread as their overall agenda. In the north western district of Thakurgaon (home to many active JMJB cadres), for example, Muslim and Hindu lawyers who have closely observed that movement’s growth agree that Islamic militancy has been shaped by local history. “Abdul Alam, the son-in-law of [JMB chief] Abdur Rahman, was arrested right here from the bus stand – it shows there’s a network here”, one said. “The border areas have a particular concentration of older migrant communities, and many of them have jobs in mosques and madrasas: they make a possible support base. There are migrants from east, south and west – Mymensingh, Noakhali and Malda – prominent in the mosques around here. There are also many new “Kuwait” mosques here – people are in it for the money”.⁸⁰ His Hindu colleague said: “In the eastern parts of Thakurgaon district minority people were evicted from their land by settlers from Mymensingh. Some left for India. In the west, Muslims from Malda and Murshidabad [India’s West Bengal] came across the border: they’re the main fundamentalists or terrorist organisers”.⁸¹

Both agree that the growth in extremism is in contrast to the area’s peaceful and moderate character: “Historically this is a secular place. In our town and surrounding areas women work and they don’t wear burqas – it’s not like other areas. There’s been no Islamist pressure for social change: they haven’t targeted cinemas or *jatras* [a form of folk theatre]”.⁸² For the Hindu lawyer, involved in fighting discrimination against religious minorities, “Thakurgaon Muslims are not communal but the state is. The fifth and

eight amendments of the constitution have encouraged people to become more fundamental. So now there is a network of extremists here even though it was historically very peaceful”.⁸³

Still, whatever the motivation, Islamist groups put great effort into social and community work, providing basic services such as education as well as helping with infrastructure development. Major development organisations have rarely had serious problems: “Islamism hasn’t given us any headaches in our work on the ground, although one Hindu NGO we worked with had trouble”, reports an American development expert. “We have an active program with imams. Obviously the ones who deal with us may not be a representative cross-section but there are still 3,000 to 4,000 of them”.⁸⁴

3. Tactics

The Jamaat and other groups have used a variety of methods to establish themselves and build credibility among local communities. They have combined organisational skills with dedication to community service, often ensuring that the beneficiaries are encouraged to support them politically. A lawyer in the north west describes a typical approach: “Jamaat established a big office with a mosque here. They have the best network of Islamist groups – they’re the organised Islamists. They also have a school, a kindergarten and a coaching centre for students. The BNP sticks with them for their own benefit. The AL talks of secularism but they’re not fighting, not going to resist them – they think that talking too loud may bring trouble”.⁸⁵ A Western diplomat agrees the strategy is successful:

They’re very, very astute. They’ve worked slowly and surely to build their base, and their commitment to supporters at the grassroots level outstrips anything the BNP or AL offer – look at education, healthcare and banking. A lot of people rely on this to survive so their support won’t go down. Could support go up? Perhaps to 20-25 per cent, because of poor governance, corruption, disaffection with the parties and the gap between rich and poor growing all the time.⁸⁶

There is no simple relationship between poverty and Islamist recruitment: many attracted to Islamist groups are not from the poorest sections of society, and militancy has been growing as the economy improves. However, growing inequality may spur some recruits, while the assistance

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Muslim lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Hindu lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Muslim lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Hindu lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, U.S. development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

that Jamaat and others provide to improve people's economic opportunities may be hard to resist. "Islamic groups may be patronising people for their business, helping build people up financially", says an AL party member. "I've seen people who were simple becoming both a mullah and an established businessman within three years. Maybe there's some relationship? Some of them are very young".⁸⁷ Another local observer says: "Jamaat now has money and other facilities, like Islamic banking, to attract people. They even use NGOs to draw people in".⁸⁸

The prospect of acquiring land and money is also a factor. A Hindu lawyer claims that many attacks on minorities, including the horrific and well publicised Radharani rape case,⁸⁹ are meant to intimidate minority communities and encourage people to abandon their land. In Radharani's village, he estimates, "there are some 1,900 minority voters but 41 or 42 families have already left".⁹⁰ He suggests there are two major, overlapping motives: to seize property and to use the shift in demographics to help establish fundamentalist politics. "The strategy comes from the BNP and Jamaat – and sometimes they use the AL too – suggesting 'if you join us, you'll get a share of the minorities' property' – so people join...and later realise they've done wrong – and then the BNP/Jamaat can say 'this is done by the AL, not by us'".⁹¹

4. Social and political program

The Islamist groups do not have identical programs. Many subscribe to a similar view of an ideal Islamic state but have significant differences over how to get there. While many observers find the ultimate Jamaat and IOJ goals alarming, it is encouraging that they are seeking to attain them within the democratic system. This sets them apart from less patient, more radical underground organisations who want to dismantle the secular state more quickly.

"It is impossible for the Jamaat to achieve its target. Here they have a network but they only get about 10 per cent of the vote – they're just not that popular".⁹² A local journalist who has been watching the Islamists for decades concurs: "The Jamaat cannot achieve its aims. People still believe in the liberation and democratic agendas, so they can't change Bangladesh too much".

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁸⁹ Radharani was raped at gunpoint while working in her vegetable fields on 11 September 2003; her assailants gouged out her eyes and left her for dead. More than two years later a Speedy Trial Tribunal in Rajshahi sentenced two men to life imprisonment. "2 get life term for rape", *The Independent* (Dhaka), 11 November 2005.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

Sharia law. Most militants' primary targets are the judicial system and the constitution. They want to move immediately to an Islamic constitution and full Sharia law. JMB leaflets distributed at the time of the August 2005 bombings emphasised this. "I went to Panchgadh, where some of the militants were caught", says a lawyer. "One of them, a young man of about nineteen, said 'we want to finish off the judges and finish off the whole system'".⁹³

Social change. Islamists push for such measures as the veiling of women, banning of *jatras* and closing of cinemas. "There are people teaching that *jatras*, *Poila Baisakh* [a traditional new year celebration] and so on are un-Islamic – that [such traditions] have to be stopped to establish Islam. So they could attack anywhere at any moment".⁹⁴

Pressuring/attacking minorities. Systematic attacks have been reported since 2001 on the minority Hindu population (some 11 million, approximately 10 per cent of the national population according to the 1991 census).⁹⁵ The Ahmadi are considered heretics and non-Muslims by mainstream Islam because the founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, claimed he was a prophet.⁹⁶ There are an estimated 100,000 Ahmadi in Bangladesh, and in the last five years there have been rallies against them, threats, attacks on mosques, refusal to allow their children to go to school and the confiscation of their publications. On 21 December 2004, amid pressure from human rights groups, the high court temporarily suspended an order banning Ahmadi publications but it is not clear how long this will hold.⁹⁷ An analyst pointed out that the anti-Ahmadi movement is important not only in itself but also in how it spurs development of Islamisation as a political platform.⁹⁸ "The conversion of Hindus is a major target, especially pressuring women".⁹⁹

Expanding Islamic education. Official statistics show a significant increase in enrolment in the 9,000 government-registered madrasas.¹⁰⁰ There are a further 8,000 private

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, March 2006.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

⁹⁵ For an overview of religious discrimination in Bangladesh, see Tasneem Siddiqui, Masood Alam Ragib Ahsan and Jesmul Hassan (eds.) *Freedom of Religion in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 2004).

⁹⁶ Mainstream Islam views Mohammad as the last prophet.

⁹⁷ "Breach of Faith: Persecution of the Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh" Human Rights Watch, Vol.17, No.6(C), June 2005, available at <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/bangladesh0605/>. "Operational Guidance Note, Bangladesh", Home Office, United Kingdom, 2005. In this report the UK elaborates on the main category of asylum applications received from Bangladesh. The report describes the political and human rights situation and provides information on the handling of cases.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁰⁰ According to the *Bangladesh Economic Review*, from 2001 to 2005, the number of madrasas increased by 22.22 per cent

madrasas under the Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasa Education Board and thousands more which are neither registered nor have their curriculum regulated.¹⁰¹ Critics of the government argue that its failure to halt the growth in madrasas or ensure effective oversight encourages the growth of Islamic extremism.¹⁰² There are three types of madrasas in Bangladesh:

- **Furqania/Hafizia**, offering pre-primary education in which children memorise the Koran and learn the basics of Islam. After a few years students usually move on to state primary education.
- **Maktab/Nournai**, offering pre-primary to primary-level classes in which the students study Islam and the Koran. They are free of charge and usually held within a mosque. Children normally attend as a supplement to standard school, and classes are arranged for a few hours either side of the normal school day.
- **Qawmi**, which are privately run and offer a complete primary and secondary education with the main focus on religious instruction.¹⁰³

As the madrasas system has expanded, it has also developed, for example starting to accept girls. There are links between the madrasa and state education systems but although some students have been able to transfer from one to the other, many madrasa graduates find it impossible to enrol in state higher education colleges. This may lead to more long-term problems than the content of madrasa education which, even if purely religious, does not tend to be controlled directly by extremists. “People send their sons to the madrasa in the hope of a better future”, says one observer in an area where there has been a rapid growth in such enrolment.¹⁰⁴ However, the hundreds of thousands of madrasa graduates have few skills relevant to the modern job market and thus have limited career options. Traditionally Jamaat has worked with the government-registered madrasas while Qawmi madrasas have been IOJ territory. However, neither party seems to

have much control over individual schools, and they do not necessarily direct the teaching.¹⁰⁵

Of government madrasas a U.S. official notes: “They are co-ed at the lower levels and are more receptive to modern teaching methods than state schools – for example, the ones I’ve visited actually use teaching tools”.¹⁰⁶ He recalls one in a conservative area that had – on its own initiative, following lengthy negotiations with its board, parents and students – set up a co-educational adolescent reproductive health program. Madrasas may get more generous funding than government schools: an economist estimates they spend \$75 per student compared to \$45 in state middle schools.¹⁰⁷

B. FROM GOVERNING PARTIES TO BANNED JIHADI GROUPS

There are two significant legal Islamist parties: the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) and the Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ). The Jamaat is larger and incorporates an influential student wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir (Shibir). Of the underground Islamist groups, three are worthy of note: the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which claimed responsibility for the August 2005 bombings; the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), led by Bangla Bhai, who was arrested in March 2006; and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI, Movement of Islamic Holy War), which has a more overtly global agenda and has been least damaged by state action.

While all share certain common approaches, they differ in several key respects. The nature of relationships between the groups is often obscure. They have differing short-term agendas and support bases – or compete by different methods for the same potential supporters. Some may be closely connected (the JMB and JMJB have at least overlapping structures and memberships) while others, despite working formally in partnership, may be at loggerheads (for example, there is some animosity and competition between the Jamaat and IOJ although both are members of the governing coalition).

One feature common to all, including the legal parties, is extreme reticence on many key questions, in particular sources of funding and the links between underground and open activities. The following sketches, therefore, rely heavily on secondary materials and are neither comprehensive nor definitive.

in comparison to 9.74 per cent growth in general educational institutions. Teachers in schools and colleges increased by 12.27 percent, versus 16.52 percent in the madrasas. The number of students in general educational institutions rose by 8.64 per cent, in madrasas 10.12 per cent.

¹⁰¹ “Jehadi Terror in Bangladesh”, Asian Centre for Human Rights, 7 September 2005.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, senior Awami League official, November 2005.

¹⁰³ “Bangladesh Educational Assessment: Pre-Primary and Primary Madrasa Education in Bangladesh”, Creative Associates International in collaboration with CARE, the George Washington University and GroundWork, 2004, p.vii.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Abul Barkat, “Economics of Fundamentalism in Bangladesh”, paper presented at Cornell University, 15 October 2005, p.10. Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars.

Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat)

The Jamaat is a well organised and politically sophisticated party. A member of the BNP-led ruling coalition, it is the most influential Islamic party: despite having only eighteen seats in parliament it holds two important ministries. Structured along classic communist lines – cadre-based, with a relatively small but highly committed and ideologically oriented membership, it is patient and has a long-term strategy. While content to work within the parliamentary system for now, it has a clear vision of moving over fifteen to twenty years into a position of more decisive influence. Many observers believe it is using the BNP – “colonising it from within” – as a way of furthering its agenda without diluting its tight party discipline and ideological purity.

It has targeted the urban middle classes in particular for support and been described as “a sort of Islamic Opus Dei”.¹⁰⁸ It is seen as clean and committed in comparison to the corrupt and self-interested major parties but has links – certainly indirectly and probably directly – to more extreme and violent groups. “Jamaat is very well established now. They have educated, cultured people. They can conceal themselves, can put their people everywhere – from the army to the village level”.¹⁰⁹ Many observers find it hard not to admire Jamaat’s discipline and efficiency, especially when contrasted with the other parties. An American observer pointed to these features in the early 1990s under its then leader:

The party stages large, extremely well disciplined rallies and continues to grow. More important, many university teachers report that the brightest students are turning for leadership to Ghulam Azam...One of the nation’s most intelligent leaders, Ghulam Azam is soft-spoken, conceptually logical, truthful, and disarming...He is a man with clear ideas of what a Muslim state should be.¹¹⁰

A senior U.S. diplomat says it remains the same today: “Jamaat has been very clever. It really has sold a clean, approachable image”.¹¹¹ An Indian analyst adds: Jamaat “has shown extreme political acumen and dexterity”.¹¹²

Jamaat’s goal is to make Bangladesh an Islamic state governed by Islamic law. It aims to do this gradually by working within the parliamentary system. The party views India as a potential threat to Bangladesh’s sovereignty, advocates a strong national army and promotes national

service. It campaigns on an anti-corruption platform and describes its outlook as follows:

The Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh upholds Islam in its entirety. It aims at bringing about changes in all phases and spheres of human activities on the basis of the guidance revealed by Allah and exemplified by His Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Thus the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh is at the same time a religious, political, social and cultural movement.¹¹³

Syed Abul Ala Maududi founded Jamaat-e-Islami in Lahore, in pre-independence India, in 1941. The party supported the Pakistani military regime during Bangladesh’s 1971 War of Liberation. Sheikh Mujib outlawed it after independence, and its members were declared war criminals.¹¹⁴ Most entered exile in Pakistan and only returned to Bangladesh under General Zia’s regime. The Bangladeshi Jamaat was only legally established in 1979. It continues to maintain close links with its Pakistani counterpart.¹¹⁵

Maulana Motiur Rahman Nizami is Ameer of the party and minister for agriculture, an influential portfolio in a country that is still largely rural. The secretary general, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojahid, is minister for social welfare, which regulates NGOs, including many which Islamists criticise for undermining traditional values. That the BNP has given them such influential posts shows the party’s electoral importance; that the ministers have received widespread praise for clean and efficient performance shows the party’s political maturity.

Islami Chhatra Shibir (Shibir)

Jamaat-e-Islami’s student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (Shibir), was founded in 1941. Nurul Islam Bulbul is the current president and Muhammad Nazrul Islam the secretary general. The organisation, with six divisions countrywide, is seen as a training ground for Islamist politicians; many of its former members have become prominent leaders, some in legitimate politics, others in underground extremist movements. Shibir’s support has historically been concentrated in particular areas and university campuses, where it has a reputation for violence.

¹¹³ “An Introduction to the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh”, available at <http://www.jamaat-e-islami.org>.

¹¹⁴ In 2000 Motiur Rahman Nizami, current Ameer of the party, took over Jamaat in the face of protests and demands he be tried as a war criminal. During the 1971 War of Liberation, he was the head of the paramilitary force Al-Badar.

¹¹⁵ The Pakistani Jamaat is part of the Islamist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) coalition that holds power in the strategically important North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹¹⁰ James Novak, *Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water* (Dhaka, 1994), p.97.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹¹² Sreeradha Datta, *Bangladesh: A Fragile Democracy*, op. cit., p.24.

Shibir campaigns for Islamisation of the education system. It also encourages students to pursue Islamic studies and prepares them to take part in the struggle for establishing Islamic rule. Critics allege that it is simply opposed to modernisation, secularism and democracy.¹¹⁶ Shibir is a member of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. It maintains close ties with similar youth organisations in Pakistan, the Middle East, Malaysia, and Indonesia. It reportedly supports Islamist groups in India and has links with Pakistani intelligence, from which, in addition to Saudi Arabia, it is said to receive financing.¹¹⁷

Shibir has a stronghold in the university in Chittagong and a significant presence on campus in Dhaka and recruits from privately run madrasas throughout Bangladesh. The group regularly clashes with other student organisations on university campuses and has been implicated in religiously motivated violence, murders and bomb attacks. When in 2003 members were charged with violent crimes, the home ministry intervened in some instances to dismiss the charges.

Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ; Islamic Unity Front)

The IOJ, led by Ameer Allama Mufti Fazlul Haq Aminee and Chairman Shaikhul Hadith Allama Azizul Haq, supports rapid transition to an Islamic state. It is more rurally-oriented than the Jamaat and has focused on using madrasas to build political support. It has spearheaded anti-Ahmadi campaigns and has a less reasonable and sophisticated image than that projected by the more polished Jamaat leaders.

IOJ is a junior member of the ruling coalition; it won two seats in the 2001 elections but has no cabinet posts. In February 2001, Azizul Haq and Fazlul Haq Aminee were arrested in connection with the lynching of a policeman after a ruling by the Bangladesh High Court banning the use of *fatwas* (religious edicts). The IOJ leaders also allegedly threatened the two judges who banned *fatwas*.

Critics claim that membership coincides largely with that of the HuJI; it is thought to support both the Taliban and al-Qaeda.¹¹⁸ However, a leading Bangladeshi political scientist cautions that “we don’t know enough about their strength and organisation”.¹¹⁹ A human rights activist in Rajshahi, who had plenty to say on the Jamaat and on

underground groups such as the JMB, could only say of the IOJ that “they are working secretly”.¹²⁰

Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)

The JMB aims to establish Islamic law in Bangladesh through armed struggle and is opposed to democracy, NGOs, many cultural outlets such as music and the cinema and imposes strict Islamic codes on the behaviour of women. The group appears to be rather internationally minded, although for the moment its activities are limited to within the country. In pamphlets left at sites of the August 2005 bombings, it warned the U.S. and UK not to occupy Muslim lands.

The JMB was formed in 1998, although it only came to the public’s attention in 2002, upon the arrest of several of its militants. The origins of the north Bengal-based organisation are somewhat murky: some reports call it the youth front of the Al Mujahideen, others say it is simply another name for the JMJB.¹²¹ The group is led by Maulana Abdur Rahman, Siddiqur Rahman (alias Azizur Rahman, alias Bangla Bhai) and Asadullah al Galib, an Arabic language lecturer at Rajshahi University. It has a network of mosques, madrasas and militant training camps in 57 districts; some senior cadres have reportedly trained in Afghanistan.¹²² Members seem to be given particular training in explosives.

The group maintains it has 10,000 full-time and 100,000 part-time cadres from all levels of society, as well as an intelligence operation with cells in various political organisations and NGOs.¹²³ Approximately \$1,250 is spent on each full-time cadre every month.¹²⁴ JMB has claimed responsibility for the 17 August 2005 bombings, a well planned and organised attack in which 400 bombs were set off in 63 of Bangladesh’s 64 districts. The government banned the JMB on 23 February 2005, and Galib, also Ameer of Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB), was arrested the same day.

Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB)

The Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) was formed in 2003. Its long-term goal is Islamic revolution through jihad, although it claims to be against the use of force.¹²⁵ It is directed by the same three men – Maulana Abdur

¹¹⁶ Shibir section, South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at <http://www.satp.org>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Alex Perry, “Deadly cargo”, *Time Asia*, 21 October 2002.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹²¹ JMJB section, South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at <http://www.satp.org>.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ “Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh: A Profile”, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies Special Report No.11, February 2006.

¹²⁵ Julfikar Ali Manik, “Bangla Bhai active for 6 yrs”, *The Daily Star*, 13 May 2004.

Rahman; Siddiqur Rahman (alias Bangla Bhai), JMJB's operational chief; and Asadullah al Galib – who lead JMB, supporting the belief that the two organisations completely overlap. The group is headquartered in Dhaka, although it operates mainly out of Jamalpur with regional offices throughout the country. Bangla Bhai was an active member of Islami Chhatra Shibir, Jamaat's youth wing, but left when Jamaat accepted female leaders.¹²⁶ Maulana Abdur Rahman was also active in both Shibir and Jamaat, and Jamaat financed his university studies in Saudi Arabia.¹²⁷

Some reports claim the JMJB is an offshoot of the JMB, renamed only after a clash with police.¹²⁸ However, there are also reports that it is the youth group of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI). It is believed to have at least ten training camps where cadres receive instruction, including through Osama bin Laden's taped speeches and videos from al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.¹²⁹ While the JMJB admits to giving recruits self-defence training, it denies it has any militant camps. It also claims to have no direct links with the Taliban, although it admires their ideals.¹³⁰

Like the JMB, the JMJB says it has 10,000 well-trained, full-time cadres and 100,000 part-time cadres as well as a significant number of sympathisers. It is also thought to be cultivating a fourth tier of young supporters called *sathis* or *sudhis*.¹³¹ Cadres are recruited from madrasas and mosques such as the Jamalpur-based Al-Madina Islamic Cadet Madrasa run by Maulana Abdur Rahman and reportedly funded with Saudi money. The JMJB has committees in each village which locals are forced to join.¹³² It is reported to have carried out over 100 vigilante operations, including extorting protection money and forcing people to adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam.¹³³ The JMJB was banned along with the JMB on 23 February 2005, the day Galib was arrested; Abdur and Siddiqur Rahman remained free until their arrests in March 2006. Since then the group is believed to have been inactive.

Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI; Movement of Islamic Holy War)

HuJI was formed in 1980 to fight the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Returnees from the war set up the Bangladesh wing of the Sunni extremist group in 1992, reportedly with funds from Osama bin Laden.¹³⁴ Showkat Osman, alias Shaikh Farid and general secretary Imtiaz Quddus lead the group, Bangladesh's most militant organisation.¹³⁵ It is a signatory to the International Islamic Front's 1998 declaration of war on the U.S., a document also signed by bin Laden. HuJI aims to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh and is strongly influenced by the Wahabi and Taliban traditions. It is against secular practices from NGOs to dance and music and opposes Indian (Hindu) and Western (Christian) cultural influences.

The U.S. State Department has designated HuJI a terrorist organisation and claims it has at least six militant training camps in Bangladesh.¹³⁶ Its stronghold is in the south east, along the border with Myanmar. It is estimated to have 2,000 core militants, mainly recruited from madrasas.¹³⁷ A significant proportion also comes from the refugee Rohingya community.¹³⁸

HuJI cadres are suspects in several violent attacks including: the November 2000 stabbing of a Bangladeshi journalist who made a documentary on the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh; the July 2000 assassination attempt on then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina; and the January 2002 attack on the U.S. Centre in Kolkata. HuJI has reportedly sent cadres to fight against the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan and has hosted Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters escaping that country. It is also accused of rallying against Indian security forces in Kashmir and supporting insurgents from India's north east.¹³⁹ HuJI was not included in the 23 February 2005 ban on extremist parties but was outlawed on 17 October 2005.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ "Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh: A Profile", Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies Special Report No.11, February 2006.

¹²⁸ B. Raman, "Bangladesh: A Seeming Crack-Down", South Asia Analysis Group Paper No.1274, 2 March 2005.

¹²⁹ JMJB section, South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at <http://www.satp.org>.

¹³⁰ Julfikar Ali Manik, "Bangla Bhai active for 6 yrs", *The Daily Star*, 13 May 2004.

¹³¹ "Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh: A Profile", Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies Special Report No.11, February 2006.

¹³² JMJB section, South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at <http://www.satp.org>.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ HUJI section, South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at <http://www.satp.org>.

¹³⁵ Bertil Linter, "Bangladesh: extremist Islamic consolidation", *Faultlines*, Vol.14, 2003.

¹³⁶ "Patterns of global terrorism 2001", U.S. State Department, available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgrtrpt/2001/html/10254.htm#huji>.

¹³⁷ Linter, "Bangladesh", op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, journalist, Dhaka, November 2005.

¹³⁸ P.G. Rajamohan, "Armed Group: Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-BD)", Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Vol.8, No.3, March 2005, pp.40-43.

¹³⁹ S. Ramachandran, "Behind the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami", *Asia Times*, 10 December 2004.

C. RELATIONS AND LINKS

1. Militants and the government

Not all militant groups are linked or even ideologically aligned. According to one analyst, “at least many of the militant outfits are small, poorly organised and scattered or fractured”.¹⁴⁰ Rivalries also preclude full collaboration. A diplomat observes: “Jamaat-IOJ relations are not that great, and it’s interesting that the IOJ has come out of the whole JMB [bombings and arrests] quite well”, even though “their end goals are reasonably similar – theological rather than ideological”.¹⁴¹

But a major concern is that links between legitimate Islamist parties and underground organisations provide cover for the latter. This is asserted by some observers, such as a veteran local journalist who says: “JMB activists are sometimes connected to the Jamaat, and arrested members have told this to the police and to RAB”.¹⁴² IOJ chairman, Azizul Haq, is reportedly on the advisory council of the radical HuJI.¹⁴³ Sceptical analysts suggest this may be why HuJI was not banned in February 2005 along with other militant organisations but allowed to continue operating freely for a further eight months.¹⁴⁴ However, links are hard to establish. In the wake of the 2005 attacks, speculation has been widespread: “People are confused about the cause of the August 2005 bombings. I think Jamaat and some of the BNP leaders helped them indirectly. Some people thought RAW [Indian intelligence] and the CIA were involved. But we’re all confused about the real story”.¹⁴⁵ A lawyer strongly opposed to the Islamist agenda concedes that “Jamaat is not doing terrorism openly. They may be related to terrorist groups at the top level but not at the ground level. At the top level they have a philosophical/political relationship”.¹⁴⁶

International analysts have also been concerned by the links between groups, and many are unconvinced by Jamaat’s denials. A diplomat says:

The sheer weight of Jamaat-related circumstantial evidence can’t be overlooked, and it’s interesting that following the last bombings on 9 December [2005] there were several days of huge pressure from all sides to drop the Jamaat from government. [A senior Jamaat leader] came round to see us at short notice: they really thought they were in trouble and wanted to insist that they weren’t

involved. Then the bombings stopped – if anything points to their involvement, these timings do. [However,] Jamaat will tell you that when they came into government a lot of their members left the party – many did not want to answer to a woman [Prime Minister Zia] – so this took away the more extreme section. They argue that these guys moved on to the JMB/JMJB. If they’ve got Jamaat literature at home it’s because ideologically they’re the same – but Jamaat takes the parliamentary route while they opt for violence.¹⁴⁷

Still, there are uncomfortable patterns of evidence for the Jamaat and its partners in government to explain. Following Abdur Rahman’s arrest, former district Jamaat chief Saidur Rahman’s chequebook was found in his house.¹⁴⁸ Many terrorist suspects arrested since August 2005 have been associated with Shibir. Motiur Nizami had, until it became impossible to sustain the pretence, repeatedly denied that the JMJB even existed.¹⁴⁹ Few are ready to believe that the government had as little knowledge of the militants as it claimed: “The question is: who are behind these people? Abdur Rahman, Bangla Bhai – who backs them? They’re not brought before the courts; eventually they may be punished but the people in the government who are behind them will escape”.¹⁵⁰

Islamist militant outfits were quite openly cultivated in certain quarters as a counterbalance to leftist groups, especially the JMJB, whose main focus was initially to eradicate left-wing extremists, particularly cadres of the outlawed Maoist Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP). The police and government were happy to encourage JMJB in this. Some BNP members objected to the arrest warrant for Bangla Bhai, arguing targeting of communists was a “pro-people mission”.¹⁵¹ When Bangla Bhai was arrested in March 2006, the *Daily Star* reprinted a collection of photographs showing how directly the administration protected him: there are pictures of him coming out of the Rajshahi police superintendent’s office and speaking to his cadres; of a *Daily Star* reporter interviewing him in a

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁴³ Linter, “Bangladesh”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁴⁸ “Cops set to hunt for 2 top JMB militants”, *The Daily Star*, 9 March 2006.

¹⁴⁹ Jamaat leader Matiur Rahman Nizami had said, for example, “...neither I nor my party knows this so-called Bangla Bhai...I told them that we did not know of the existence of any Islamic militant group in Bangladesh”, quoted in *The Daily Star*, 20 May 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁵¹ JMJB section, South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at <http://www.satp.org>.

Union Parishad [village council] chairman's office; and of a police van escorting his procession.¹⁵²

Whatever the evidence, it would be logical for elements of the government to cultivate extremists. According to an academic who has studied Islamist politics closely, supporting militants is the only logical option for Jamaat:

They know they can't achieve state power through constitutional means so the only other means is the bomb. This is why they create the JMB and others. These *are* Jamaati organisations, even though Jamaat leaders still deny it face to face. At first they'd say Bangla Bhai and his colleagues were media creations; now they say they're an exaggeration.¹⁵³

Those who suspect the BNP of deliberately providing cover believe it is for self-interest, not ideological reasons. The BNP needs its Islamist partners in government in order to be seen as more truly Islamic, not least because Zia herself is a modern, secular woman. If the price of this is tolerating some violent organisations that may have their uses in targeting opponents, that could be acceptable within the arithmetic of political alliances.

The BNP has also sought to turn the belated crackdown to its advantage, rebranding the administration as triumphing over terrorism. Prime Minister Zia has even managed to win over some formerly sceptical observers. "The government's reaction to the 17 August [2005] blasts was woeful", observes a Western diplomat. "But they did, very slowly, recognise the problems and then did some imaginative things: they went to religious leaders and got them to sign up to joint statements, translated bits of the Koran into Bangla, picked up foot soldiers".¹⁵⁴ *Time* magazine abruptly dropped its bleak predictions of Bangladesh's imminent meltdown in favour of lavish cover-story praise for Zia's "rescue mission".¹⁵⁵ "We have eliminated terrorism from the country this time", proclaims the prime minister. "We would also eliminate corruption if people voted us for the next term".¹⁵⁶

2. External links and finances

It was fears of links between its militants and al-Qaeda that put Bangladesh on the post-9/11 map. Reports suggested that a core of Bangladeshi mujahidin who had fought alongside bin Laden in Afghanistan were mobilising as part of his global campaign. "The Bangladeshi government has the names of 2,100 individuals who've been in

Afghanistan, and there may be more", said a political scientist. "The intelligence service has a file called 'Bangladeshi Taliban'"¹⁵⁷ Sheikh Hasina has emphasised the dangers of "Talibanisation", a theme picked up in the wider world.

Bangladesh's Islamists are indeed inspired by global causes and maintain a variety of international ties. However, most are overwhelmingly focused on their own country and display no great interest in exporting Islamism or framing their politics in an explicitly internationalist context. Some, such as HuJI, have signed up to international agendas such as endorsing al-Qaeda's 1998 call for jihad against the West.¹⁵⁸ The travails of the militant outfits following the March 2006 crackdown could also provide a new opening for outsiders: "There could be enough strong-willed individuals out there to start up [militant activities] again but they're now in some limbo. This might be the perfect time for outsiders...to move in and help out".¹⁵⁹ Circumstantial evidence, such as the popularity of bin Laden-themed posters and T-shirts following the 9/11 attacks, suggest there is fertile ground for exploiting frustration at the West's perceived anti-Islam bias. But this hypothesis does not stand up. "There's *very* little anti-U.S. sentiment in the country and no problems at all for us in our work", observes a political training expert with an American organisation.¹⁶⁰

During the Danish cartoon controversy, the streets were conspicuous for their calm and the lack of publicly demonstrated anger: "Jamaat were very bitter at the cartoon controversy but couldn't do much about it".¹⁶¹ The many Bangladeshis who work in the Gulf are more exposed than ever to other strands of Islam, in particular Wahhabi. But this is a double-edged sword: working in exploitative conditions for low wages may not foster much genuine warmth, even if Gulf money is being used to bolster Islamist politics.

The question of foreign financing of Islamist politics worries analysts, not least because there is little hard data. A Western diplomat admits: "On foreign funding we don't know how much is linked to Jamaat. The biggest problem for us and the U.S. is that we just don't know – we try but it's very difficult".¹⁶² The lack of information makes forming policy difficult: "We haven't directly raised concerns [about funding of fundamentalists] with the Saudis and others although in late 2005 we weren't happy about

¹⁵² *The Daily Star*, 7 March 2006, available at <http://www.thedailystar.net/2006/03/07/d6030701044p.htm>.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, professor, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁵⁵ "Rebuilding Bangladesh", *Time Asia*, 3 April 2006.

¹⁵⁶ *The New Nation*, 27 July 2006.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi political scientist, New York, February 2006.

¹⁵⁸ Rajamohan, "Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh", op. cit.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

a huge Islamic Heritage Foundation donation. We just don't have the evidence – it would be very hard to argue and they'd say they're tackling terrorism's roots. Jamaat generates huge amounts of income themselves".¹⁶³

Another foreign official asks: "Why wouldn't the Gulf countries fund mosques and madrasas? For them it's a no-brainer: they're not so expensive and can only benefit them. But for the government there's no excuse not to know what they're up to".¹⁶⁴ He suggests "the government should take Saudi money but say 'we'll take madrasas but only under the government board' or ask for a health clinic rather than a mosque – there are 220,000 mosques already. And remember, imams are not full-time: they all have other jobs and lives outside – they're social entrepreneurs".¹⁶⁵

An economist has estimated that fundamentalists make a profit of \$200 million annually on investments across most sectors of the Bangladeshi economy, with the largest share coming from financial institutions.¹⁶⁶ Still, there is no doubt that many projects require serious levels of funding. Almost all of Bangladesh's districts are now home to Islamic microcredit schemes; where others, such as Grameen Bank or BRAC, have to charge interest rates of over 15 per cent to make the projects work, the interest-free Islamic models run at a loss, which has to be covered by their organisers. Some funding comes openly from sympathetic donors such as the UK-based Muslim Aid;¹⁶⁷ the sources of other funds, however, are opaque.

Certainly the Gulf has become linked in the popular imagination with the inflow of funds for Islamic projects. The smart new mosques that have mushroomed in villages across the country go by the name of "Kuwait mosques"; most have madrasas attached, and many are home to other networks. Some suspect them of being a thin cover for political organisations: "Other than the JMB there are so many groups. They exchange money – the main centre is the Kuwait mosques. I know of some people who are actively working for fundamentalists".¹⁶⁸ In the absence of more solid information on foreign financing, one thing is clear: "Financing petroleum supply is far more

important as power over the government – compared to that, madrasas are small beer. They've been subsidising petroleum products through government and Islamic bank loans for years, and this gives them a foothold that crosses party lines. [Parties are also influenced by] the incentive of more serious investment interest from the Gulf".¹⁶⁹

D. THE MARCH 2006 CRACKDOWN

In December 2005 the U.S. issued a new list of measures for Bangladesh to take to become a "full partner" in its war on terror, including the capture and prosecution of the JMB's Abdur Rahman and the JMJB's Bangla Bhai.¹⁷⁰ Against a background of pressure to act since the August and December bombings, this may have been the key incentive. The government tracked down and arrested both leaders and several hundred foot soldiers in March 2006. This appeared to drive the remaining members completely underground.¹⁷¹

However, previous experience has led many observers to treat the arrests with scepticism. Both leaders had previously been arrested (for organising fatal bomb attacks) but then released. The made-for-TV-drama at the siege that led to Abdur Rahman's arrest in Sylhet struck many who watched the live coverage as somewhat implausible. "The arrests of Bangla Bhai and others were just for show", was a typical reaction. "If the BNP come back [to power after the election] they'll release people".¹⁷² Another observer concurred: "The arrests were just a show – look at how TV was invited to film the arrest of Abdur Rahman. They should be hanged but this government won't do it".¹⁷³

"My gut feeling is that they could have picked the leaders up a lot earlier", a diplomat said, "but it was a question of pressure. Until recently they'd hardly faced any fallout but then the pressure became so great they had to act. So they have done something but they may not be as committed as they want us to believe".¹⁷⁴ Others wonder if the army may have pushed for action: "There's a theory that it was only when the army stepped in that Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai were picked up. Both were taken by RAB straight into army custody – maybe that's just a security issue but it could indicate more".¹⁷⁵ Certainly RAB showed unusual restraint: despite the dramatic operation,

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Barkat, "Economics of Fundamentalism in Bangladesh", op. cit., p. 16. He acknowledges, however, that his estimate relies on a "heuristic method...based on assumptions" rather than solid data. He first outlined his analysis of the economics of fundamentalism in "Bangladesher Maulbader arthaniti", Dr Abdul Gaphur Memorial Lecture, Dhaka University, 21 April 2004.

¹⁶⁷ Muslim Aid's website describes its work in Bangladesh at <http://www.muslimaid.org/subpages.php?section=ourwork&sub=offices&down=yes>.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, UK official, December 2005.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, AL district member, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

its members did not kill or critically injure any of the Islamists.¹⁷⁶ It is possible the military was genuinely frustrated at having its image sullied by their incapacity in the face of a mounting terrorist threat.

Overall, the arrests convey a mixed message. They have not uprooted the entire structure of Islamist militancy but they have demonstrated that Bangladesh is far from being a failed state. “There’s no need to worry about Bangladesh...Now we’re in a stable position. Even if other leaders remain free, Abdur Rahman has been arrested. I think they have no power to repeat widespread bombings. But the JMB/JMJB *will* stay here in the longer term. As long as Islamic education...is here, they’ll continue their underground activities”.¹⁷⁷ Some are sympathetic to the official version, not least because they do not expect counter-terrorism efforts to be more efficient than other government endeavours: “I watched the villagers interviewed on TV – they were genuinely surprised to discover Bangla Bhai had been [staying] there. So maybe it’s more security force incompetence than deliberately not arresting them. And they may have got lucky, for example managing to track them from mobile phone calls”.¹⁷⁸

Whatever the real story, the arrests do not address the prospect of quiet, creeping Islamisation. “There’ll be a tendency with the arrests to say ‘we’ve done it’. Yes, they did it on their own, and it shows they can manage if they choose. But this is not the whole picture – there’s still plenty yet to emerge about the support structures underlying terrorism”.¹⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the JMB and JMJB are at a crossroads: whether the leaders try to hold on to their positions from jail or face a genuine succession struggle may indicate how active and powerful the organisations remain. Those who are still free – and this must include the bulk of middle-ranking leaders as the mass arrests were almost all of very young men – may look for more sophisticated leadership ready to learn from mistakes. In the meantime, Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai probably have more riding on the coming election than anyone. An AL victory would almost certainly mean a death sentence – so self-preservation may explain the reduction in violence.

¹⁷⁶ Although at least one died, probably from an explosion he himself caused: “The JMB’s alleged top bomb-maker also died in a blast during an operation by security forces on Monday in the eastern town of Comilla, the BBC’s Waliur Rahman in Dhaka says”. “US Peace Corps leaves Bangladesh”, BBC, 15 March 2006, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4810100.stm.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

V. THE ELECTIONS

General elections bring out the best and worst of Bangladesh’s democracy. In their process and outcome they also expose the basic logic of power that underlies party politics. What can look like chaos and dysfunction in daily political life makes much more sense in the context of the imperatives of electoral politics and business practice. Street politics, including strikes and shutdowns, have formed a culture of their own. Demonstrations may not be edifying, but for the parties they are essential displays of power. An international observer said: “The AL are...getting out on the streets but that’s the reality: if you don’t, you don’t count. Foreigners care about corruption and election violence but ordinary people here care about prices – so for the AL to go to the streets is a perfectly reasonable strategy”.¹⁸⁰

The approaching election will share many features of past elections. Unfortunately for analysts, one is a lack of basic information. There are no reliable published polls, although the major parties frequently commission detailed and highly professional surveys for their own use. “There are no opinion polls”, complains a political analyst. “The papers wouldn’t dare publish critical ones, and people might not answer honestly in any case”.¹⁸¹ The following sections outline the major process and policy issues and assess the risk of violence or complete derailment.

A. THE MECHANICS

The last possible date for the elections is 25 January 2007. However, it is generally assumed they must be earlier to leave some time for government formation. Many think mid-January is likely but there are signs that the BNP may be aiming for the first week of January or even the last week of December.¹⁸² Since 1996 Bangladesh has followed an unusual system of a three-month non-party caretaker government to oversee general elections.¹⁸³ While similar administrations are used elsewhere, they are normally found in exceptional or transitional situations. In Bangladesh, however, the concept is part of the constitution.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁸³ The constitution does not specify the term of the caretaker government but ties it to the election of the next parliament, which has to take place within 90 days of the dissolution or expiration of the previous house. Constitution of Bangladesh, Article 123(3).

¹⁸⁴ The caretaker system drew on the experience of the interim government that oversaw the first democratic election following

The experience has been fairly positive: the caretaker governments have overseen reasonably free and fair elections and assisted in smooth transitions. The author of the most detailed analysis of their performance concludes they have been beneficial but should not be idealised: they “may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition to ensure the holding of parliamentary elections in a free, fair and impartial manner”.¹⁸⁵ Others argue the system is inherently flawed. Political scientist Ali Riaz says that when introduced, the caretaker provision “was regarded by almost all political parties as a panacea”, but developments have shown this assumption to be dangerously naive:

Over the last few years it has become evident that the 13th Amendment, meant to guarantee free and fair elections, has had the unintended effect of politicisation of the judiciary, hurt the presidency, and made the army dependent on partisan politicians. Since political expediency was the driving force behind introducing the system, the long-term consequences of the system of caretaker governments and how it would impact the aims of government were scarcely contemplated. Meanwhile, crucial details have remained unexplained, such as the modus operandi of selecting the members of the caretaker government (described as “advisers”), and the relationships between the executive branch, and the EC [Electoral Commission] and the army. It is some of these ignored “details” that have now come back to haunt the country.¹⁸⁶

Seat calculations (the division of constituencies between alliance partners) and finances are crucial. In Bangladesh’s first-past-the-post system it is the number of seats, not the percentage of the vote, that counts. The BNP-led alliance won a comfortable majority in 2001 even though the AL received more votes. Analysts suggest there are about 50 swing constituencies on which the parties will lavish attention. For the smaller parties in particular, the bargaining with alliance partners over the seats they can fight – how many and how winnable they are – is as important as the election itself. An academic points out: “Jamaat still don’t have a *single* safe constituency – even after 70 years and all the money and effort. If they weren’t with the BNP they’d be nothing”.¹⁸⁷ Once the parties have divided the

seats, money is an important factor in selecting candidates. Although the legal limit for campaign spending is 500,000 takas (\$7,700) per constituency, candidates spend much more: “Without cash, even a popular local candidate can’t win”.¹⁸⁸

Neither main party would be averse to rigging the elections, although the government has many more levers at its disposal. Opposition politicians and independent analysts suggest the machinery has already been put in place, not least with the appointment of sympathetic local officials to oversee the polls and the knowledge the army and RAB may provide less than neutral security assistance. There are also concerns about the supposedly impartial senior figures who will take charge of the process: “In 1996 the chief election commissioner and the chief justice *were* impartial but now both are totally and utterly pro-BNP”.¹⁸⁹ Still, past attempts at vote-rigging have not succeeded – in 1996 and 2001 powerful incumbent governments were convincingly removed.

The major threat may well be that the election is derailed before it starts. The AL remembers 1996, when its poll boycott led to a re-run under much more satisfactory conditions. If it is not reassured that it can translate anti-incumbent sentiment into a working majority, it may be tempted to repeat this tactic. The major areas of contention are clear. The AL is demanding:

- ❑ a neutral caretaker government: it does not trust the BNP-appointed chief justice (the automatic head of the caretaker administration);
- ❑ a full, transparent voter list: the AL fears its supporters may be prevented from voting while the electoral roll may be stuffed with fake names to boost the BNP alliance’s tally;
- ❑ the army be under the caretaker government, rather than left under the BNP-appointed president; and
- ❑ guarantees over the role and conduct of the Chief Election Commissioner.

B. PARTY ELECTORAL CALCULATIONS

BNP. The BNP knows that even if it gets the same vote as in 2001 it cannot win on its own. Alliances and seat-sharing deals are central to its efforts to keep a favourable balance of power. Apart from maintaining its current coalition, it has pulled off a minor coup by persuading General Ershad to bring his Jatiya party into the alliance.

the end of military rule in 1991, but its proximate rationale was to resolve the deadlock following the failed election of February 1996, which the AL boycotted. Provisions for the form, functioning and scope of authority of the caretaker government are set out in Chapter IIA of the constitution, which was added by The Constitution (Thirteenth Amendment) Act, 1996.

¹⁸⁵ Nizam Ahmed, *Non-Party Caretaker Government in Bangladesh: Experience and Prospect* (Dhaka, 2004), p. 130.

¹⁸⁶ Ali Riaz, “The crippled caretaker”, *Himal Southasian*, August 2006.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, professor, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

The BNP also wants to use the election to groom the next generation for leadership. It has some reasons to feel confident: it has managed the economy reasonably enough, kept its core support base (such as the urban middle classes and army) roughly on board and has won popularity with RAB.

However, doing well in the elections will be a challenge. It probably fears support has declined, partly as a result of anti-incumbent sentiment and partly as a backlash against specific policies. The fact that some of the greatest sources of public displeasure, such as poor electricity supply and lack of basic facilities, can be traced directly to corrupt and shoddy procurement may eat into its middle class and business community support base.¹⁹⁰ Analysts suggest it is also worried about a loss of popularity: “Tareq [Rahman; Khaleda Zia’s son and the BNP’s election coordinator] commissioned three polls last year. Each one showed them facing serious losses. So they’ll surely put the machinery in place to rig the elections”.¹⁹¹

Addressing these challenges may encourage a manipulative approach on procedural issues. Attempting to rig the polls may appear an attractive option if it feels genuinely threatened. However, it needs to achieve all of its goals without: (i) being seen internationally as coddling terrorism; (ii) appearing blatantly to steal the election; (iii) having the military intervene directly; (iv) giving too many seats to the Jamaat or other “kingmaker” parties; and (v) creating so much economic insecurity that foreign investors get scared. These add up to a serious constraint and may restrict it to seeking marginal advantage by, for example, playing for time in negotiations over the caretaker government (especially if legislative changes are needed) and bargaining hard over seat allocations right up to October (perhaps using public antipathy to terrorism as leverage over Jamaat).

AL. The AL is confident that it remains the most popular single party and can benefit from the anti-incumbent mood. However, it is increasingly nervous about electoral manipulation and feels it has no alternative but to take to the streets. Many leaders believe that a replay of 1996 is possible: that a boycott could lead to a fairer election it could win. There are, however, quiet fears that pushing confrontation to the brink might encourage an otherwise reluctant military to step in.

The AL will continue to argue that the BNP has not only failed in its counter-terrorism efforts but is part of the problem. It will increase attempts to cherry-pick new party members and coalition partners, including disaffected BNP members. But it has suffered one loss already: it might have had the most to gain from an alliance with Ershad’s Jatiya party but the BNP has beaten them to it.

AL supporters insist their party has always been closer to the people. They worry that the army doesn’t support them,¹⁹² but the party is still fundamentally unwilling to change how it does business and will struggle to build a positive platform. Trying to manage a large and unwieldy fourteen-party coalition will not help.

Jamaat. The first priority for Jamaat is to ride out the storm of the militant arrests. The leaders know they are unlikely to increase their overall percentage of the vote significantly but they will still try to leverage advantages in bargaining with the BNP. The two parties still need each other, although the fallout from the March 2006 arrests may weaken the Jamaat’s hand when it comes to seat allocations.¹⁹³ The BNP may reassess the value it places on Jamaat’s support, especially now that it has General Ershad on board. Even before this a diplomat said: “I’m not convinced the BNP need the Jamaat as much as they think they do”.¹⁹⁴ Voters may also be turned off: “Jamaat doesn’t have much support here. When I speak to my neighbours, I think there may be some older men in the households who visit the mosque and may vote Jamaat – but they seem likely to reduce their vote now. It’s the core cadre and those who are paid that will remain – Jamaat will lose floating voters”.¹⁹⁵

However, Jamaat may be able to turn the crackdown on militants to its advantage, portraying itself as the “responsible” face of conservative Islam. In any case it will continue to spread roots institutionally across Bangladesh: its strength is more than simply its ability to generate votes. And it will be keeping its eye firmly on the longer-term goal of gradually consolidating its influence by using other parties to its own advantage. “The Jamaat will be back down to seven seats if the BNP dump them. So they’re very unlikely to leave the alliance, even if it drags them into a long association with messy government”.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ For example, early 2006 was the first time in years that Dhaka’s upmarket Gulshan and Banani residential districts suffered serious loadshedding; early March saw three days without water supply. Such disruption did not go down well with the capital’s better-off residents. Crisis Group interviews, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁹³ For example, “In our district they’re bargaining over one seat but it’s not a winnable one”, Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi, March 2006.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

C. THE RISK OF VIOLENCE AND DERAILMENT

Violence around the elections could come from the Islamist underground or from mainstream politics. A local AL activist worried about the militants: “The situation may deteriorate in the coming months. The terrorists will be used in the election run-up”.¹⁹⁷ A more neutral observer supported some of these fears: “Active Jamaat and other Islamist cadres are very dangerous, they could do anything. If the next elections are fair they won’t even get into the villages. But if they’re not fair it could be brutal. They have arms and could use them”.¹⁹⁸ However, militant violence would only make sense if groups wished to harm the prospects of the Islamist parties and the BNP alliance. “I’m not sure we’re going to see many attacks in the run-up to the election”, said a Western diplomat. “It’s too damaging – at least, if Jamaat really is linked to them”.¹⁹⁹

Unrest is more likely to originate in mainstream politics, especially if large street protests are met with heavy-handed security action. Bangladesh has plenty of precedents for such unrest and recent months have shown that just as the AL is still capable of mobilising large crowds, so are the police still happy to respond with *lathi* cane charges and other tough action. The situation would certainly become more tense if the AL moved toward a boycott. Still, even this is not a definite trigger: “If there’s an acceptable caretaker government, there won’t be violence. Or even an unacceptable one – as long as neither party has power once the caretaker is in place. But after the elections is a different question”.²⁰⁰

The political elite on both sides of the BNP/AL divide have too much invested in the current system to want it to collapse entirely. As a diplomat puts it, “it’s still too early to judge whether the political process could come off the rails altogether. Yes, all the signs are bad but the AL and BNP can’t afford it. They would be the big losers if the military had to step in or if you got a government of national unity, which brought the small parties to the fore”.²⁰¹ While both sides will no doubt use brinkmanship, it is unlikely either would like to see the process fall apart. The danger is more that their mutual antagonism may provide the space for others who have no love for democracy or stake in the existing system to whip up violence.

Finally, even if the elections have no procedural flaws, there is no guarantee the political process will have

embraced all of its constituents. “Even if electoral issues such as the election commission and caretaker government are fixed, this could leave out two constituencies: religious/ethnic [minority] communities and women”, a human rights activist emphasises. “There has already been an erosion of women’s mobility in the public and private sphere. And some sections of communities are being bypassed entirely, for example by being cut off the electoral roll”.²⁰² Minority leaders worry that their problems will continue regardless of whatever deal may be reached to satisfy the major parties. “The election increases the heartbeat of minorities”, warns a Hindu activist. “They will be prevented from going to court, will be threatened, will be told not to vote...and if they do, it will be assumed they voted for the opposition. All of this – even torture – will not be disclosed in the media”.²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, AL district member, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

²⁰² Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Rajshahi division, March 2006.

VI. INTERNATIONAL ROLE

Outside influence is limited. Bangladesh is not heavily dependent on overseas assistance, so aid offers limited leverage, which would in any case be difficult to apply. Furthermore, donors do not find it easy to agree on political desiderata.²⁰⁴ Bangladesh's most significant relationship – with India – is mired in mutual mistrust and persistent inability to address the other's priorities. The U.S. seems to carry more weight with the government than other outsiders. Equally, the World Bank and major lenders have some influence. The UN is often dismissed but does represent certain norms and standards and can remind the government of these.

Bangladesh has been receiving more attention than usual. There have been several high profile visits since the 2001 elections, including by then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and British State Minister for Foreign Affairs Kim Howells in 2003.²⁰⁵ But sustaining attention is difficult: "We keep saying Bangladesh is higher on our priority list, and this is true. But when it comes to formulating a plan, we are where we were before. Even the diagnosis is difficult: there have been workshops and so on but I come away feeling we're not all on the same page".²⁰⁶ A senior UN official observed: "Bangladesh is nowhere on the map: it's not on other member states' agendas, and it plays a low-key role itself. It's just the occasional blip on the radar, like the bombings, that gets noticed".²⁰⁷

The spike in U.S. and British interest in 2003 was prompted by intense concerns over suspected international terror links, including the possibility Bangladesh could have been harbouring senior al-Qaeda figures. A bomb attack on the British high commissioner in May 2004 also demanded London's attention.²⁰⁸ However, these concerns dissipated before they resulted in either concerted policy interventions or revision in the overall pattern of engagement. "When I first arrived, we had concerns of a growing extremist threat, partly because of the global trend, not Bangladesh for its

own sake", recalls a Western diplomat. "But now we are more focused on domestic issues in their own right".²⁰⁹

The international community does have some traction, though it tends not to play all the cards it holds. A promising starting point is that Bangladesh's leaders want to be a respected part of the global community. The EU is important as a destination for Bangladeshi exports, and the standards imposed by Western textile buyers have emphasised that upholding some international norms is essential for the health of the local business community.

A united, forceful voice can bring results, as was demonstrated by the February 2005 Washington donors conference, to which the Bangladesh government was not invited.²¹⁰ Stung by its exclusion and aware of criticisms, the government chose the eve of the conference to announce the banning of the JMB and JMJB, a group whose existence it had until then denied, and the arrest of Galib and other militants.²¹¹ There has been coordinated action in certain areas: "The U.S., UK and EU troika visit in January [2006] all lambasted the government on election issues, and the press picked up that we're all singing from the same song sheet", recalls a diplomat. "But we have to be careful not to get too involved in internal politics, although we have long called for dialogue and for the AL to return to parliament".²¹²

But internationals weaken their impact by pursuing different goals. As a seasoned diplomat put it, "it's not that the U.S. and EU differ fundamentally but they push for different things. The U.S. asks for less – and easier – things such as signing off on counter-terrorism policy, while the EU pushes for tougher reforms...On human rights, why does the U.S. accept complete silence in face of well documented violations?"²¹³ There have been suggestions of a follow-up to the 2005 Washington meeting, an idea that many diplomats and donors approve of. But the priority of coming up with a strategy for engagement in the run-up to the election may preclude such a meeting until there is a new parliament and government.

²⁰⁴ One attempt to align donors more effectively and exert quiet leverage was a "Tuesday Group", which brought senior international representatives together for monthly meetings. However, participants were divided over its utility, and it lapsed in late 2005. Crisis Group interviews, donors, Dhaka, August 2005 and April 2006.

²⁰⁵ *The Daily Star*, 17 November 2005, available on Awami League website at <http://www.albd.org/news/2005>.

²⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, U.S. State Department official, Washington DC, February 2006.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

²⁰⁸ See "Blast at Shahjalal shrine injures British HC, kills 2", *The Daily Star*, 22 May 2004.

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

²¹⁰ The 23–24 February 2005 meeting was attended by major bilateral and multilateral donors. A more immediate impetus for its convening was the assassination of former Awami League Finance Minister and UN Under-Secretary General Shah A.M.S. Kibria in January 2005. See Jane Novak, "Bangladesh: Fertile Ground for Democracy or Extremism?", *Worldpress.org*, 29 April 2005.

²¹¹ A report noted that "the catalyst for the crackdown appears to have been a donor meeting in Washington...at which the rising tide of violence and Islamic militancy in Bangladesh – and ways to end it, possibly by suspending funding to the aid-dependent nation – topped the agenda". Alex Perry, "Reining in the radicals", *Time Asia*, 7 March 2005.

²¹² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

²¹³ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

Electoral help is at the forefront of donor thinking but planning is not easy. As a UN official points out, “elections are the one issue that is live – and electoral assistance can often be a useful entry point to build relations with governments. Although here they’ve rejected our help with electoral rolls, so there’s little chance of us coming in now”.²¹⁴ There is no consensus on what approach would be desirable or acceptable (monitoring, observing, facilitating) although there is broad agreement that there is a need to get in early to have any impact; the time for more significant interventions may already have passed.

Some donors are well aware of the limitations of their current engagement. A U.S. diplomat observed that:

USAID’s new strategy has rhetoric that is right on target but 80–90 per cent of the aid we give has nothing to do with governance. We plough money into health and other areas without building capacity, just helping the government to cede responsibility. We give food assistance mainly because Congress has earmarked it so we have no choice. But our aid doesn’t offer us any leverage – so this \$100 million is untouchable but also not delivering.²¹⁵

Beyond this lies the challenge of transforming relations to a more mature political engagement but there is little interest in moving beyond the traditional aid giver-recipient relationship. “It’s been harder to get our EU partners away from the ‘donor mindset’”, complains a Western diplomat. “We’ve had some limited successes in changing EU attitudes here but capitals are a different matter”.²¹⁶ Still, committed international representatives in Dhaka insist that the role of outsiders is crucial and, whatever the difficulties, the time to act is now. A senior development official says:

The government is characterised by extraordinary centralisation and short-termism with no real capacity to think seriously about the future, and it won’t do it without support, pressure and assistance from outside. But key international players are focused too much on militancy rather than wider issues. There are rumours that the U.S. may have got the government to crack down on terrorism at the cost of going easy on political reform – and the UK is similarly keeping its main focus on security. To really deal with this the focus has to be on politics.²¹⁷

There are some areas where the international community should act.

Push for continuing/strengthening democracy

- ❑ help open space for dissent and debate in civil society, the media and elsewhere;
- ❑ support judicial reform and assistance in law enforcement, including limiting the role of paramilitaries and pushing for better basic rights protection;
- ❑ support parliamentary procedures, the development of parliament committees and research capabilities;
- ❑ keep pressure on the parties to have “track 2” discussions – at least for identifying critical issues;
- ❑ consider a follow-up to the 2005 Washington donor meeting to clarify priorities once the new government is in place;
- ❑ remind political leaders that democratic practice will be judged not only by formal achievements, such as competent elections, but also by progress in making governance more inclusive, transparent and accountable;
- ❑ promote special efforts to protect women and minorities; and
- ❑ push for full investigations of violent incidents and prosecution and punishment of perpetrators; the Shah Kibria assassination case shows that international pressure can at least keep cases alive, even if not guaranteeing prompt justice. Kibria’s murder stirred international outrage, and diplomats in Dhaka have pushed for a full investigation.

Offer serious electoral assistance

- ❑ lay down tough, clear benchmarks on election standards, including the behaviour of key institutions such as the caretaker government and election commission;
- ❑ help with monitoring but only if it is a serious undertaking: “The monitors *must* watch the votes being cast and counted and the numbers being marked rather than just standing around and monitoring irrelevant things”;²¹⁸ and
- ❑ monitor extremely closely and even suspend the payment of certain international development funds in the run-up to the elections given the high risk

²¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

²¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, U.S. State Department official, Washington DC, February 2006.

²¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

²¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, international development official, Dhaka, April 2006.

²¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, international political analyst, Dhaka, April 2006.

that they will be diverted to campaigning or buying votes.

Work together on counter-terrorism

- ❑ offer technical assistance in counter-terrorism and give political support to those willing to make genuine efforts;
- ❑ help build civilian police capacity;
- ❑ do not abandon development assistance but devote more time and serious expertise to understanding Bangladesh as a strategic country;
- ❑ recognise that immediate terrorist threats have their roots in long-term political dysfunction and locally conditioned politics of nationalism and religious identity; the threat of extremism can only be effectively addressed if effort is put into better understanding this context;
- ❑ reinforce economic growth with expanded trade and the opening of markets; and
- ❑ engage with the Bangladeshi diaspora and use it to build bridges of understanding and shared interest.

VII. CONCLUSION

There is a long history of predicting a grim future for Bangladesh. The run-up to the 2001 elections also saw bombings and instability. Some recent developments may be more worrying than those earlier ones but Bangladesh has proved resilient in the past. Even before the August 2004 attack on Sheikh Hasina, it had seen at least 21 major bomb blasts, killing 158 people, in the preceding six years.²¹⁹ Five years before that, the *Economist* had warned that “another of Bangladesh’s perennial problems is political violence”, but then it meant “particularly the violence perpetrated by Marxist and Maoist groups”.²²⁰ Today, these groups no longer present a threat to the state.

The 2006 crackdown on Islamist terrorists recalls the Awami League government’s response to that earlier spike in leftist violence: “Last year several thousand people died in attacks and bombings. The government, which was elected after promising to improve law and order, has had more than 50,000 people arrested in the past three months. This has helped to improve security and allay public anger, though many Bangladeshis believe that a series of highly publicised mass surrenders of suspects were more political theatre than a genuine end to a reign of terror”.²²¹

The threat posed by Islamist extremism is of a different nature and order to the communist challenge, which was already on the wane by the late 1990s. Serious risks are indeed posed by determined and sophisticated jihadis, and there is evidence of increased religious conservatism in certain areas. However, excessive fears of Islamism are not useful, and the many worrying indicators need to be balanced against positive trends and Bangladesh’s history of resilience:

From how things seemed in 1988, the current situation wouldn’t look so bad. Many of the hopes for democracy were realised. Look how much we take for granted – for example that the government *will* be decided by elections and so on. This is quite democratic, and the struggles over the caretaker government and election commission are partly a function of more assertive democratic demands.²²²

There are canaries in the mine that must be watched: the treatment of minorities, the increased power of the

²¹⁹ Aravind Adiga, “A Democracy is shaken”, *Time Asia*, 6 September 2004.

²²⁰ “Heavens above”, *The Economist*, 15 July 1999.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Crisis Group interview, February 2006.

paramilitary and the criminalisation of politics all suggest ominous trends. There is no guarantee that Bangladesh's traditions of resilience and social and religious tolerance will prevail over all threats. But if the international community is to play any role in boosting the chances, it needs a new approach, moving from treating Bangladesh as an aid recipient with only intermittent political significance to a strategic player worthy of broader engagement.

Islamabad/Brussels, 23 October 2006

APPENDIX A
MAP OF BANGLADESH



APPENDIX B

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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