



SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

The Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention of the United States Institute of Peace commissioned this report in recognition of the rising importance of domestic developments in Bangladesh and their impact on South Asian security. Since 1999 Islamist militants have unleashed a campaign of terror that has gone virtually unchecked. At the same time, governance, rule of law, and provision of justice seem in short supply. Indian security agencies see connections between terrorism in India and groups operating in Bangladesh. The report is based partly on field research and interviews the author conducted in the region in August 2005.

Sumit Ganguly is a professor of political science and holds the Rabindranath Tagore Chair in Indian Cultures and Civilizations at Indiana University. A specialist on regional security issues in South Asia, he is the author, editor, or co-editor of fifteen books on the region. His most recent book (with Devin Hagerty) is *Fearful Symmetry: India and Pakistan in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

SPECIAL REPORT 171

AUGUST 2006

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
A Note on Sources	3
The Background of Islam in Bangladesh	3
The Transformation of Islam	4
The Growth of Islamist Groups	4
Impacts of Instability in Bangladesh	7
Demands for Autonomy, Fears of Secession	8
Conclusion and Recommendations	9

Sumit Ganguly

The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh

Summary

- Bangladesh has generally been heralded as a stable, democratic Muslim state that has made great strides in economic and human development. Following the restoration of democracy in 1990, it carried out three largely free and fair general elections in 1991, 1996, and 2001.
- Since 1999, attacks by Islamist militants have been increasing. They have targeted opposition politicians, scholars, journalists, members of the judiciary, religious minorities, and members of the Islamic Ahmadiyya sect.
- Recent years have seen a deepening crisis in governance with continued politicization of civil society, deterioration of judicial independence, and diminishing rule of law and respect for human rights.
- Until very recently, the ruling coalition of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (backed by two Islamist parties) denied the existence of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh, dismissing these charges as "hostile propaganda," designed to besmirch the country's reputation. Following a countryside terrorist attack in August 2005 and recent suicide bombings, the government has begun cracking down on selected individuals.
- Indian observers and policymakers are concerned about the activities of Bangladeshi Islamists. They accuse Dhaka of exacerbating the ongoing insurgencies in India's



ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan federal institution created by Congress to promote the prevention, management, and peaceful resolution of international conflicts. Established in 1984, the Institute meets its congressional mandate through an array of programs, including research grants, fellowships, professional training, education programs from high school through graduate school, conferences and workshops, library services, and publications. The Institute's Board of Directors is appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the Senate.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

J. Robinson West (Chair), Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, D.C. • **María Otero** (Vice Chair), President, ACCION International, Boston, Mass. • **Betty F. Bumpers**, Founder and former President, Peace Links, Washington, D.C. • **Holly J. Burkhalter**, Director of U.S. Policy, Physicians for Human Rights, Washington, D.C. • **Chester A. Crocker**, James R. Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University • **Laurie S. Fulton**, Partner, Williams and Connolly, Washington, D.C. • **Charles Horner**, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C. • **Seymour Martin Lipset**, Hazel Professor of Public Policy, George Mason University • **Mora L. McLean**, President, Africa-America Institute, New York, N.Y. • **Barbara W. Snelling**, former State Senator and former Lieutenant Governor, Shelburne, Vt.

MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

Barry F. Lowenkron, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor • **Peter W. Rodman**, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs • **Richard H. Solomon**, President, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting), • **Frances C. Wilson**, Lieutenant General, U.S. Marine Corps; President, National Defense University

Northeast by turning a blind eye to growing illegal immigration. They also contend that Bangladesh is cooperating with Pakistan to target India.

- In light of these developments, questions persist about the government's dedication to respond decisively to Islamist terrorism, conduct free and fair elections in 2007, and address the deterioration in the rule of law and respect for human rights.
- Because of Bangladesh's regional importance and the implications of internal security developments, the United States has limited policy options to promote its regional goals and ensure democratic elections.

Introduction

On November 29, 2005, some ten people, including two police officers, were killed in suicide bombings in the towns of Chittagong and Gazipur, Bangladesh. In the Gazipur incident, the suicide bomber, dressed as a lawyer, had entered the office of the local bar association. These two attacks came as part of a spate of bombings in November that had cost the lives of two lower court judges and two court employees. The previous attacks, it is widely believed, were the work of the recently banned *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen* (JUM), a pro-Taliban, Wahabi-oriented organization.

The attacks on the judiciary were the apogee of a series of lethal assaults that have taken place in Bangladesh in the past several years. Almost all can be traced to a range of Islamist organizations that have been operating with impunity. For example, Islamist militants are alleged to be responsible for the February 2005 assassination of S.A.M.S. Kibria, a former foreign secretary and foreign minister. They also were implicated in the death of a prominent opposition politician, Ivy Rehman, and an aborted attempt in August 2004 on the life of Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the parliamentary opposition leader.

In the past several years, Islamist militancy in Bangladesh and tensions with India have attracted the attention of journalists, scholars, and some policymakers in the United States and elsewhere. The ruling coalition (backed by two Islamist parties, the *Jamaat-i-Islami* and the *Islamic Oikye Jote*) of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has vigorously denied that Islamist militancy in Bangladesh is on the rise. Instead it has dismissed these charges as "hostile propaganda," designed to besmirch Bangladesh's reputation as a moderate Islamic state.

Substantial numbers of Indian observers and policymakers have taken a markedly different position. With equal vigor they have sounded the alarm about the activities of radical Islamists in Bangladesh. They also have accused Bangladesh of exacerbating tensions in India's Northeast by turning a blind eye to growing illegal immigration into India and by cooperating with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI-D) in nefarious designs against India.

Bangladesh, which lacked a tradition of militant Islamism, has indeed moved in that direction in recent years, as Eliza Griswold showed in her *New York Times Magazine* article (January 23, 2005). The rise of Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh and their possible ties to Pakistan should be of concern to U.S. policymakers. Given the weak governance and lack of political order in Bangladesh, the increase in Islamist militancy could easily turn it into a fertile area for various radical groups to take root and flourish. On the regional level, the emergence of such groups could worsen already strained relations with India. They also could adversely affect U.S. security interests if Islamist insurgents from Southeast Asia and the Middle East come to see Bangladesh as a possible haven, especially as they face U.S. pressure in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

India, too, has concerns about the involvement of Bangladesh in its troubles in the Northeast, which could create an opportunity for Pakistani involvement. The empirical basis for this assertion is limited and partial: Unequivocal evidence of Pakistani involvement is hard to establish, and most of the assertions about Pakistani involvement come from Indian sources. However, given the increasing cooperation between Washington and

New Delhi on issues of counterterrorism and intelligence, the United States should take these claims seriously.

A Note on Sources

This report makes use of a range of sources, including newspaper accounts from the region and interviews with key decision makers. It also cites reliable secondary sources. Finally, it draws on the database of the Institute of Conflict Management (ICM) in New Delhi, a private think tank. The data derived from the ICM's database, though extremely useful, must be treated with some degree of circumspection because it partly relies on information from India's Ministry of Home Affairs.

The Background of Islam in Bangladesh

India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh share an intertwined colonial history. India and Pakistan emerged from the British Empire as independent states in 1947. As the principal inheritor of the British Empire in South Asia, India started its independent history as a secular, democratic state, constitutionally committed to the principles of civic nationalism. Pakistan, on the other hand, was created as a homeland for the Muslims of South Asia. It was composed of two wings, West and East Pakistan, more than a thousand miles apart, reflecting the demographic concentration of Muslims in British India. In 1971, after facing widespread and ruthless military repression, an indigenous nationalist movement sought and received Indian military assistance. Subsequently, India's military intervention in the civil war enabled East Pakistan to secede and establish itself as the state of Bangladesh.

Islam had not come to the eastern parts of India and present-day Bangladesh as a conquering force. Instead it diffused throughout the region as a by-product of the introduction of new forms of agricultural technology by Muslim rulers in the eighteenth century.¹ As a result, Islam in this part of the world came to share many of the attributes of the prevalent Hindu culture, and the two cultures interpenetrated. Their coexistence was not always peaceful and harmonious, however. Class and religious differences, combined with tensions over land tenure, resulted in periodic riots in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Some of the worst examples of communal carnage took place on the eve of the British departure from the subcontinent and the partition of the state of Bengal in 1947. Violence wracked the region both before and during partition. It swept through undivided Bengal, and especially Calcutta, after Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, declared "Direct Action Day" in August 1946, departing from his earlier commitment to constitutional methods of political protest. During partition much communal conflict took place in the neighboring state of Bihar and the district of Noakhali.

In the aftermath of partition the eastern part of Bengal became East Pakistan. Although Pakistan had been created as a Muslim homeland, profound cleavages of class, region, and sect characterized the Muslim communities of South Asia. Jinnah had managed to dexterously paper over these tensions. However, once the state of Pakistan was created, the differences swiftly came to the fore. The elites of the Punjabi-dominated provinces of West Pakistan viewed their brethren in East Pakistan with condescension.

They believed the practice of Islam in East Pakistan had become tainted through its association with Hinduism. Popular cultural practices, including dance, drama, poetry, and music, linked the two communities. Vestiges of this cultural intermingling remain today. For example, the Bangladeshi national anthem was written by Rabindranath Tagore, a Hindu and the only Indian to receive the Nobel Prize in literature.

A fundamental divide over the question of a national language emerged between the two wings of Pakistan. Seeking to forge a common national identity, Jinnah declared in

Bangladesh, which lacked a tradition of militant Islamism, has indeed moved in that direction in recent years.

Profound cleavages of class, region, and sect characterized the Muslim communities of South Asia.

1948 that Urdu would be the country's national language. His declaration was greeted with violent demonstrations in East Pakistan. The fragile unity of the state was compromised as significant numbers of the Bengali-speaking populace resented the imposition of Urdu.

Quite apart from this growing linguistic divide, significant socioeconomic disparities came to characterize the two wings of the country. As has been well documented, the eastern part of the country was the proverbial stepchild of the nation. A range of grievances against the central regime in Islamabad went unaddressed, and over time a nationalist movement developed in East Pakistan. The brutal suppression of this movement in 1971, after Pakistan's first free and fair election in 1970, culminated in the creation of Bangladesh.

The Transformation of Islam

During the political upheaval of 1971, elements of East Pakistan's society, most notably the members of the Jamaat-i-Islami, chose not to support the independence movement. Instead they supported the Pakistani army and were implicated in some of the massacres that took place. As a result of their role in the civil war, immediately after Bangladesh's independence they were largely marginalized. In addition, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, had a pro-Indian bent and sought to forge a secular, democratic republic.

As a result of their initial setback, Islamist elements in Bangladeshi society remained dormant. They held the secular Muslim intelligentsia in disdain but were unable to publicly challenge their authority. Their ability to reassert themselves came about as a consequence of the Awami League's governance. Its incompetence, corruption, and mal-administration, coupled with natural disasters, led to Sheikh Mujib's assassination and the overthrow of his regime in August 1975.

Sheikh Mujib and the Awami League had faced a monumental task of reconstruction following the creation of Bangladesh. The insurrection against Pakistan and its violent repression had cost the country dearly in both human and physical capital. However, some segments of Bangladeshi society, though disaffected from Pakistan, had viewed Sheikh Mujib's pro-India policies with considerable distrust.

After a brief interregnum, in November 1975 General Ziaur Rahman, the chief of staff of the Bangladesh army, seized power. In an attempt to legitimize his rule General Ziaur first opened the door to radical Islamists. He encouraged the return of those who had collaborated with the Pakistani army and built ties with the Jamaat. He also dismantled constitutional provisions prohibiting the formation of communal parties and associations. Finally, he started the erosion of the constitutional commitment to secularism with a series of amendments that gave primacy to Islam. Internecine rivalry within the military contributed to his assassination in May 1981. After his demise there was a brief span of civilian rule under Abdul Sattar, a former Supreme Court judge. He was overthrown in another military coup in March 1982. Under the new military dictator, General Husain Mohammed Ershad, the march toward the Islamicization of Bangladeshi society and state continued. In 1988 Ershad amended the constitution and declared Islam the state religion. In late 1990 Ershad was overthrown as a result of a mass popular uprising. Since then Bangladesh has moved fitfully toward civilian rule.

The Growth of Islamist Groups

In the past several years a number of militant Islamic groups have emerged in Bangladesh. Some are affiliated with particular political parties, while others have no specific political affiliation. What factors helped spawn these groups? The answer is complex.

In part they arose as a result of the general transformation of Bangladesh's political and social milieu. In their quest for legitimacy, two military rulers had wrapped them-

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, had a pro-Indian bent and sought to forge a secular, democratic republic.

Bangladesh has moved fitfully toward civilian rule.

selves in the mantle of Islam. In the process they created conditions for the emergence of various radical groups. Specifically, they allowed elements of the conservative Muslim clergy to express their views more freely and granted them opportunities to preach against religious minorities and insist on particular interpretations of Islamic theology. In effect, they not only altered the terms of political discourse in Bangladesh but also helped fashion a new political culture that could accommodate a shift toward a more pristine, austere, and parochial vision of Islam.

Even when military rule ended in Bangladesh and civilian and, at least nominally, democratic rule was restored, the emerging political culture supplanted previous notions of cultural pluralism and tolerance. Attacks against Hindus, the principal minority population, increased, and the state proved unwilling to stop the perpetrators.

The military had overthrown Sheikh Mujibur Rahman because of growing lawlessness, widespread corruption, and economic mismanagement. Under military rule Bangladesh did enjoy a modicum of political stability and modest economic growth. However, the problems of corruption and political chicanery became endemic.

Despite the military's return to the barracks and the restoration of democracy in 1990, these problems contributed to institutional decay. According to many observers, the judiciary was backlogged and corrupt; the police and paramilitary forces were brutal and venal; the press, though combative, did not adhere to robust norms of professional reporting; and the bureaucracy was mostly slothful and inept. With the principal organs of the state failing, Bangladesh saw a phenomenal growth in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). However, NGOs, even highly effective ones, cannot take over the functions of a modern state.²

The most disturbing feature of the Bangladeshi polity, however, is the state of the two principal political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). They do have some ideological differences. The BNP, widely perceived as being more pro-Pakistani, has no stated commitment to secularism and is more accommodating of Islamist sentiment. Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of the former military dictator, General Ziaur Rahman, is the leader of the BNP. The Awami League is perceived to be more pro-Indian, is avowedly secular, and remains associated with the 1971 creation of Bangladesh. The AL is led by Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the daughter of the assassinated Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

Despite their ideological and political differences, the parties are outgrowths of the personalities of these two leaders. There is little intra-party democracy in either organization. Once in parliament, neither party has shown regard for the notion of a loyal opposition. Both have resorted to extra-parliamentary tactics to undermine the functioning of parliament. Consequently, most parliamentary proceedings have the quality of political theater and little else. The ongoing conflict between them has contributed to fundamental failures of governance. The reliance of the BNP on the Jamaat for support enables the latter to wield political influence well beyond its parliamentary (and electoral) strength.

One of the most troubling aspects of the Jamaat's presence in parliament is its links with various radical Islamist organizations. In the wake of the 2005 bomb blasts that rocked Bangladesh, the authorities arrested seven members of the *Jama'atul Mujahideen*. All had been members of either the Jamaat or its student wing, the *Islami Chhatra Shibir*.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the Jamaat is the only party in Bangladesh seeking to establish an Islamic state. A variety of other entities share the same goal. According to the Bangladeshi newspaper *The Daily Star*, at least 30 such organizations operate in the country. Some have stayed clear of mainstream politics, but others have worked with existing political parties.

The most compelling, proximate cause of the emergence of militant Islam in Bangladesh is the state's failure to address endemic problems of unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation, and political order. As a result large segments of the population have little faith in the efficacy of state institutions. In such a political milieu, religious

With the principal organs of the state failing, Bangladesh saw a phenomenal growth in nongovernmental organizations.

One of the most troubling aspects of the Jamaat's presence in parliament is its links with various radical Islamist organizations.

The most compelling cause of militant Islam in Bangladesh is the state's failure to address unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation, and political order.

groups and organizations, which provide basic social services, assume an important role. Furthermore, they underscore the state's inability to perform the quotidian tasks of maintaining public order, providing essential social services, generating employment, and pursuing public works.

These groups have sought to dramatize and exploit the many failures of the Bangladeshi state. Because of their ideological underpinnings they have also sought to highlight their religious credentials. To this end, they express widespread concern about the plight of fellow Muslims worldwide. Not surprisingly, much of their ire is directed toward Israel because of the Palestinian question, against India because of the Kashmir issue (and the periodic outbreaks of communal violence within India), and at the United States for its support of Israel, involvement in Afghanistan, and invasion of Iraq. Assuming unyielding positions on these issues generates considerable popular support in Bangladesh, since many of these causes are seen as those of the global Islamic community.³ Such support reinforces notions of victimhood and injustice. Focusing on the real and imagined shortcomings of India, Israel, and the United States enables the ruling regime in Bangladesh to divert public attention from a range of failures of governance.

Radical Islamists direct their wrath against any individuals or groups that profess secularism and express unrelenting hostility toward sectarian and religious minorities.

Radical Islamists direct their wrath against any individuals or groups that profess secularism and express unrelenting hostility toward sectarian and religious minorities. They intimidate members of the dwindling Hindu community and harass the minuscule Ahmadiyya Islamic sect. Evidence continues to mount that this harassment occurs with the complicity of the Bangladeshi state. In its most recent annual report, the United States Commission for the Protection of Religious Freedom noted that "non-Muslims in Bangladesh face societal discrimination and are disadvantaged in access to government jobs, public services, and the legal system." The commission's report expressed concern about the government's decision, under militants' pressure, to ban the publication and distribution of Ahmadiyya religious literature in January 2004. The courts suspended the ban in December 2004 (with further legal action pending), but the government has not withdrawn it, despite international pressure.

Radicals have harassed, intimidated, and even killed journalists and writers they deem un-Islamic.

In addition, radicals have harassed, intimidated, and even killed journalists and writers they deem un-Islamic. They have launched periodic attacks against the vulnerable Hindu population and have threatened to destroy the mosques of the Ahmadiyya community. There is little doubt that the Bangladeshi state in general, and the Khaleda Zia coalition regime in particular, has tacitly permitted these groups to pursue their activities without much hindrance.

When in power, the AL also is hardly immune to criticism along these lines. For example, in its last days in 2001 the AL dismantled the Vested Property Act (which had deprived Hindus of their homes and land holdings as early as 1969). However, the provisions of the law that annulled the act were so anemic that it did little to protect Hindu property rights. Nor did subsequent regimes make much effort to vigorously enforce the new provisions. Observers of Bangladeshi politics have described this half-hearted attempt to overturn the law as a mostly symbolic gesture designed to court the Hindu vote before a national election. More recently, in an attempt to subtly outbid the BNP in courting the orthodox, key AL members have publicly used religious symbols and slogans.

Currently several militant Islamist groups exist in Bangladesh. They are the *Jam'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB), the *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* (JMJB), the *Harkat-ul-Jihad-Islami* (HuJI), the *Islami Chhatra Shibir*, and the *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*.⁴

The JMB formed in Jamalpur district in 1998. Its precise antecedents are unclear. Some reports in the Bangladeshi press contend that it is the youth wing of the outlawed militant organization, the *Harqat-ul-Jihad*. It first came to the attention of the press, political authorities, and the public in May 2002, when eight members were arrested while allegedly in possession of incendiary bombs. In February 2005, faced with growing pressures from international donors, the government of Bangladesh banned the organization.

The JMJB derives its inspiration from the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. It is widely believed to have formed in 1998 but came to public attention in 2004 when it started to

target members of the left-wing organization, the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (East Bengal's Communist Party). The JMJB was banned in February 2005. In March 2006, under international pressure, the Bangladesh government finally arrested one of the most notorious JMJB operatives, Siddiqui Islam, who was known by his nom de guerre, "*Bangla Bhai*" (Bengali brother).

According to press reports, the HuJI formed in 1992 with the assistance of Osama bin Laden's International Islamic Front. Since its inception it has demanded that Bangladesh be converted into an Islamic state. Like its counterparts, the JMB and the JMJB, it is acutely hostile to secular organizations and individuals. Some sense of its ideological leanings can be gleaned from its slogan, "*Amra Sobai Hobo Taliban, Bangla Hobe Afghanistan*" (We will all become the Taliban and we will turn Bangladesh into Afghanistan). The HuJI is suspected of working in concert with the ISI-D and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Press reports suggest that HuJI operatives have helped the ULFA set up and run training camps in the Chittagong Hill Tracts next to the Indian state of Tripura.

Jamaat-i-Islami (founded as early as 1941) has a student wing called *Islami Chhatra Shibir* (ICS). It shares the other Islamist groups' goal of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh. Its influence is most pronounced on a number of university campuses, notably in Chittagong, Dhaka, Jahangirnagar, and Rajshahi. It is also expanding its presence at Khulna and Sylhet universities. Press reports link the ICS to the activities of Pakistan's ISI-D in Bangladesh.

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir, intriguingly enough, was founded in Jerusalem in 1953. Its Bangladeshi chapter started in November 2001 in the wake of a rising tide of anti-Americanism. The organization has managed to gain considerable strength in various public and private universities through extremely deft recruitment tactics. Several press reports have implicated the group in serious acts of violence.

Impacts of Instability in Bangladesh: India's Troubled Northeast

The domestic consequences of the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh are apparent. Less obvious are the effects on its neighbor, India. The region of India adjoining Bangladesh has long experienced internal tensions and political upheavals. Accordingly, it constitutes an attractive target for external actors to sow further discord and exploit discontent.

During much of the 1960s and 1970s, the Mizo and Naga tribal groups that were challenging the Indian state in the region received substantial military, economic, and moral support from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Following improvements in the bilateral relationship with India, the PRC ended its assistance to these insurgents. With the denial of external support and sanctuaries, the Indian military managed to suppress some of the rebel movements, most notably in the state of Mizoram. Despite this modest success, other deep-seated grievances against the Indian state continued to fester and provided equally attractive opportunities for other nations to exploit.

Political developments within Bangladesh and the growth of militant Islamist organizations in that country are related to the prevailing political instability in India's northeastern states in two ways. First, there is some evidence of the involvement of the Bangladeshi state and various Islamist organizations in aiding and abetting the existing political turmoil in this region. Second, the region faces a very pressing problem of substantial illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Much of the ongoing political upheaval in these states is of indigenous origin. However, the willingness of various Bangladeshi regimes to aid insurgents by providing sanctuaries, weaponry, and other forms of logistical assistance has contributed to the prolongation and exacerbation of the conflicts.

For years insurgencies have wracked India's northeastern region. More recently the region also has become a site of contestation and conflict between illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and local inhabitants. Finally, government spokesmen in New Delhi and in regional capitals have argued that the ISI-D is actively engaged in destabilizing this region in concert with Bangladesh's Directorate General of Field Intelligence (DGFI).

There is some evidence of the involvement of the Bangladeshi state and various Islamist organizations in aiding and abetting political turmoil in this region.

Any explanation of the political instability and turbulence in this region must take into account three intertwined factors: geography, history, and ethnicity. The physical geography of the region isolated it from much of the rest of South Asia. In precolonial times, thanks to its location, it had little contact with the plains of northern India. Only during the colonial period did the lure of timber, oil, and tea bring it into the British Indian empire. The British obtained a toehold in this region because of their ability to fend off depredations on its rulers by warring forces from Burma.

British colonial rule over the region came about in the early nineteenth century. Since the late eighteenth century the local Ahom monarchy had been in decline. Faced with internal revolts, the monarch had sought Burmese assistance to quell them. However, Burmese help proved costly. The Burmese turned against the monarch and repressed the native population. The British, who were steadily establishing a presence in eastern India, were alarmed by the Burmese depredations. Their growing concerns culminated in the Anglo-Burmese war and led to the Treaty of Yandabo of 1826 and the expulsion of the Burmese from Assam. With the British discovery of tea in the region and the possibilities of commercial cultivation, British entrepreneurs, along with a substantial Indian working class from the plains, increasingly populated the region throughout much of the nineteenth century.

In the early part of the twentieth century tensions started to erupt between the native Assamese and immigrants from the plains, precipitated by large-scale immigration of Bengalis, Marwaris, and Nepalis into Assam. Substantial numbers of indentured laborers, particularly tribals from the Chotta Nagpur plateau, were brought from the impoverished state of Bihar. They were made to work in the flourishing tea industry as cheap manual labor.

The sudden and substantial influx of these new ethnic groups, mostly from the northern Indian plains, caused considerable misgiving among the Assamese, who feared that their distinctive identity would be obliterated over time.

They were not the only inhabitants of the region who were concerned about the loss of their cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Other ethnic groups, such as the Nagas and the Mizos, sought to assert their rights as British colonialism drew to a close in 1947. The most striking of these demands came from the Nagas. As British rule was about to end, their leader, Angami Zapu Phizo, argued that the Nagas had never been part of India and had only grudgingly accepted British "paramountcy." With the imminent departure of the British, the Nagas claimed the right of self-determination.

Demands for Autonomy, Fears of Secession

One of the leitmotifs that have characterized New Delhi's relations with the Northeast is the tension between demands for regional autonomy and fears of secession. A number of northeastern ethnic and tribal groups have felt that most central governments in New Delhi were not especially sensitive to their needs. They also feared that the dominant culture of the Hindi-speaking heartland would, over time, efface their distinctive cultural and ethnic heritage. These misgivings contributed to demands for autonomy and, especially in the case of the Nagas, for outright secession from India.

Regardless of the regime in New Delhi, the Indian state tended to see all these demands through the prism of potential threats to national unity and territorial integrity. This led it to adopt a rather unyielding stance toward most demands for autonomy. As a result it has repeatedly deployed troops in Assam and other northeastern states to abrogate the civil and political rights of much of the population, using considerable force to suppress insurgent movements. In fairness to the Indian state, it has accommodated all insurgent groups in the realm of normal politics once they have eschewed violence and accepted the Indian constitution.

These strategies have yielded markedly different outcomes. Once crushed, the Mizo insurgency gave rise to the new state of Mizoram. The Naga insurgency, which appeared

One of the leitmotifs that have characterized New Delhi's relations with the Northeast is the tension between demands for regional autonomy and fears of secession.

to have waned with the creation of the state of Nagaland, has revived. Finally, the insurgency in Assam, led by the ULFA, is merely smoldering. Despite the ULFA's present status, Indian analysts and policymakers allege that its cadres enjoy protection and support in Bangladesh.⁵

Widespread illegal immigration into India's northeastern states comes from Bangladesh. A porous border, corrupt security personnel on both sides, and acute poverty in Bangladesh have facilitated the movement of illegal immigrants. Bangladeshi policymakers deny that any large-scale immigration has taken place. Indian officials, on the other hand, insist that illegal immigration is steadily altering the demographic composition of entire districts adjoining the border areas. According to a recent report in a noted Indian news magazine, as many as 7.9 million Bangladeshi illegal immigrants are in West Bengal, 5 million are in Assam, and almost 5 million are in Bihar and Jharkhand. Once these immigrants obtain ration cards (enabling poorer individuals to purchase essential foodstuffs at government-controlled prices), they can then register to vote. When they obtain the franchise they can shape electoral outcomes in crucial districts.

The issue of illegal immigration has also been politicized in another way. In and out of office, Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders have made concerted efforts to portray these illegal immigrants as "infiltrators." The use of this term to describe illegal economic migrants tends to equate them with the Pakistani-supported insurgents in Kashmir.

The myriad problems facing India's Northeast cannot be attributed to Bangladesh's malfeasance or India's policy failures alone. The shortcomings of India's policies did contribute to the rise of demands for autonomy and secession. These movements have also received support from various Bangladeshi regimes. Furthermore, although no regime in Bangladesh may have actively encouraged or directly facilitated illegal migration into India, the Bangladeshi government has shown scant interest in curbing the trend. Steady migration into India provides this desperately poor country with a useful safety valve.

Is there clear-cut evidence of Pakistani collusion with Bangladeshi intelligence agencies to exploit the problems of India's Northeast? Incontrovertible, dispassionate evidence is hard to find. However, various Pakistani regimes have had few compunctions about exploiting disaffection in India, whether in the Punjab or in Kashmir. Accordingly, it seems likely that Pakistan would seek to utilize any avenue it could to sow discord in other parts of India. Given the extensive links that do exist between Islamist groups in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Indian claims about Pakistani attempts to destabilize the Northeast through sympathizers in Bangladesh may have some foundation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh identifies several areas of concern, including the prevention of and response to terrorism, development of democratic systems, and respect for American values. But the United States has yet to develop sophisticated and effective means to promote its goals in Bangladesh—a serious problem that needs immediate attention. What are some ways the United States could promote its varied goals in the country?

Judicious Use of "Public Shaming" Still Works. As one of Bangladesh's principal aid donors, the United States is in a position to exert considerable pressure on the current government in Dhaka. This form of pressure is likely to work even though Bangladesh, in a technical sense, no longer depends upon foreign aid. However, the government of Bangladesh sees the flow of foreign assistance to the country as an emblem of international recognition. Restricting or denying assistance (or making credible threats to do so) in response to failure to make good progress toward U.S. goals will have a "shaming effect." Public shaming remains one of the few effective levers to change policy within the government. Needless to say, this lever needs to be applied strategically to retain its usefulness.

Widespread illegal immigration into India's northeastern states comes from Bangladesh.

Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders have made concerted efforts to portray these illegal immigrants as "infiltrators."

Public shaming remains one of the few effective levers to change policy within the government.

Strategic Conditionality of Economic Assistance. The United States could identify elements of its economic assistance package that could be made contingent on Bangladesh's progress toward political reform, rule of law, and protection of minority and other human rights. U.S. programs in Bangladesh include child survival and health, development assistance, economic support, foreign military financing, International Military Education Training, and—until recently—the Peace Corps. (Because of security concerns, the Peace Corps suspended its mission in Bangladesh in early 2006.) In FY2005, these programs totaled nearly \$64 million.

Innovative and More Comprehensive and Effective Programs. At the same time, the United States should fund new and more effective programs to improve Bangladesh's educational system, police and paramilitary training, and judiciary reform. Although there is no current U.S. funding for general police training and judicial reforms in Bangladesh, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) requested \$2.9 million for FY2007 to support *Sesame Street*-based programs and primary education. These are probably not sufficient to deal with Bangladesh's massive educational challenges and should be expanded in focus to include increased access to primary and secondary education.

Consistent Public and Private Exhortation. The United States should continue to exhort Bangladesh privately and publicly to address its most serious problems. This exhortation must also be specific, consistent, and direct. Simultaneously the United States can exert pressure through multilateral aid consortia. Bangladeshi regimes appear to respond to well-orchestrated, multilateral pressures. For example, in early 2005, a donors' conference cochaired by the World Bank, the European Union, and the State Department convened in Washington. Displeased with the situation in Bangladesh, the donors threatened to levy sanctions against Dhaka. The message was not lost on the government: Soon after this meeting, it began an unprecedented crackdown on the militant groups it repeatedly had denied even existed.

Ensure Free and Fair 2007 Elections. The United States must focus its attention on the upcoming 2007 elections in Bangladesh. It is essential to all U.S. policy goals that the elections be conducted without harassment, intimidation, and violence and that an orderly post-election transition take place. Thus far, numerous irregularities have come to light, including alleged manipulation of election commission and caretaker government personnel, as well as the election commission's creation of a deeply flawed voters' list. The high court struck down this new voters' list and ordered the government to revise the 2001 list, but questions remain about the current government's intention to hold free and fair elections.

New Tools for Election Monitoring. Not only are election-monitoring missions essential, but monitors should be authorized to measure potential indicators of fraud, such as suspiciously high numbers of registered voters or lopsided victory margins. For example, monitors should ascertain how many votes could be cast in an hour, to determine after tallying if tampering took place. With this information, the United States and other international partners could recommend corrective measures during, rather than after, the elections.

Harmonize International Policy Approaches. The United States should continue to increase its coordination with other countries and multilateral agencies in Bangladesh to deal with the various challenges presented by Dhaka. Since the government exploits differences among donors, it is imperative for the international community to make concerted efforts to lessen gaps between their respective goals. In this regard, the United States already has begun turning to India on regional issues. But it must pursue this strategy carefully. The United States should pay heed to India's concerns about illegal immigration and Bangladeshi (and potentially Pakistani) support for the ULFA and other insurgent groups. Nevertheless, it also must unequivocally, if quietly, urge India to address longstanding political grievances in its northeastern region.

Elegant solutions are in short supply, and many of these suggestions may entail various kinds of political and diplomatic costs. However, the cost of inaction surely will be

The United States should fund new and more effective programs to improve Bangladesh's educational system, police and paramilitary training, and judiciary reform.

Not only are election-monitoring missions essential, but monitors should be authorized to measure potential indicators of fraud.

higher if Bangladesh continues on its current trajectory of poor governance, corruption, diminished respect for human rights and rule of law, and increasing Islamist militancy.

Notes

1. See Eaton, Richard, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
2. Some statistics show how inadequately the state addresses the population's most basic needs. According to *Time Asia* (April 10, 2006), life expectancy in Bangladesh in 2005 was 63 years; the country ranks 188th out of 192 countries. Eighty-three percent of the population lives on less than two dollars a day. Some 70,000 people die of tuberculosis every year. Some 32 million Bangladeshis consume water containing arsenic.
3. I am grateful to Ambassador Salman Haider for drawing my attention to this subject.
4. Some of this information is based on personal interviews by the author in West Bengal and Assam during an extended trip to those Indian states in August 2005.
5. Author's interview with senior retired police official in Guwahati, India, August 2005.

Sources

- Ahmed, Khaled, "Bangladesh: Pakistan's Blowback in a Looking Glass," *The Friday Times* [Lahore], April 1, 2005.
- Ahsan, Zayadul, "Inside the Militant Groups, 1: Trained in Foreign Lands, They Spread Inland," *The Daily Star* [Dhaka], August 21, 2005.
- Ashraf, Shamim, "All Seven JMB Shra Men Had Links to Jamaat, Shibir," *The Daily Star*, April 28, 2006.
- Baruah, Sanjib, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Chattopadhyay, Suhrid Snkar and Haroon Habib, "Challenges in the East," *Frontline* [Chennai], January 14–27, 2006.
- Cherian, John, "Politics of Animosity," *Frontline*, September 11–24, 2004.
- Committee to Protect Journalists, "Bangladesh," www.cpj.org/attacks05/asia05/bangla_05.html.
- Ganguly, Sumit, "Bangladesh and India," in *Assessing the Quality of Democracy*, Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, eds. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.
- —, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions since 1947*. New York: Columbia Press, 2001.
- —, *The Crisis in Kashmir: Portents of War, Hopes of Peace*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Habib, Haroon, "Striking Terror," *Frontline*, December 3–16, 2005.
- —, "The Menace of Militancy," *Frontline*, October 11–24, 2003.
- Karlekar, Hiranmay, *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?* New Delhi: Sage, 2005.
- Kibria, Nazli, "Political Violence Spreads in Bangladesh," *The Japan Times*, April 10, 2005.

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

- Lum, Thomas, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*. CRS Report for Congress RL31362 (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 10, 2004).
- Misra, Udayon, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*. Simla, India: Institute for Advanced Study, 2000.
- Mohsin, Amina, "Language, Identity, and the State in Bangladesh," in *Fighting Words*, Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002.
- Nag, Sajal, *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North-East India*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2002.
- Parashar, Swati, "Bangladesh: The Quagmire of Conflicting Nationalisms," *IDSS Commentaries*, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (Singapore), April 2006.
- Raman, B., "Bangladesh and Jihadi Terrorism—An Update." www.saag.org/papers9/paper887.html.
- Rashid, Harun ur, "The Rise of Islamic Extremism in Bangladesh," *The Daily Star*, March 2, 2005.
- Riaz, Ali, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.
- Transparency International, *Corruption in Bangladesh: A Household Survey, 2004*, www.transparency.org.
- United States Agency for International Development, *Bangladesh, Strategic Statement FY2006–2010*. Dhaka: USAID, September 2005.
- United States Commission for the Protection of Religious Freedom, *Annual Report Of The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. Washington, D.C.: May 2006, 204–208.
- Verghese, B.G., ed., *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*. New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2004.



**United States
Institute of Peace**

1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036

www.usip.org