



# SPECIAL REPORT

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

## ABOUT THE REPORT

Since the serial bombings of August 17, 2005, the attention of policymakers and analysts in Washington and beyond has focused on Bangladesh. In light of the growing public-policy import of this often-overlooked but critical South Asian Muslim country, the United States Institute of Peace launched a sustained critical inquiry on Dhaka's internal and external policies and their varied domestic and international ramifications. The authors carried out field work in Bangladesh for this report in June 2006 under the auspices of the Institute's Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention.

A. Tariq Karim is a former Bangladesh ambassador to the United States and a diplomat with more than three decades' experience. He is now Harrison Fellow in the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland.

C. Christine Fair is a senior research associate at the Institute's Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention. She specializes in South Asian political and military affairs and has written numerous articles and monographs on the politics and security of the region. With Ali Riaz she is overseeing a multiauthor book project on Bangladesh's internal and external security.

**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 181

JANUARY 2007

## CONTENTS

Introduction	2
What Is at Stake for the Parties and the Polity?	2
Origins of the Secular and Islamist Divide	4
Justice Denied	4
Contesting Islam's Role in Political Life	5
Worrying Signs Thus Far	6
Response of Civil Society and the Opposition	6
Securing the 2007 Election and Bangladesh's Future	7
Conclusion	9

## A. Tariq Karim and C. Christine Fair

# Bangladesh at the Crossroads

## Summary

- Although Bangladesh is generally considered to be a secular democracy, recent years have seen a steady erosion of the important principles underlying it.
- Bangladesh's political system is mired in conflict as the two mainstream parties battle for control of the country and its resources. With neither party able to win a majority, both have sought alliances of convenience to secure power. Neither party has addressed pervasive corruption and systemic failure to provide good governance and law and order.
- The choices Bangladeshis make—or, more critically, are permitted to make—in the coming months will have great import for the country's future. Because politics in Bangladesh has become a zero-sum game with no meaningful political role for the opposition, the stakes are high for both the opposition Awami League (AL) and the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).
- Increasingly, Islamist parties have emerged as political kingmakers with newfound legitimacy. In the 2001 elections the BNP came to power because of its alliance with key Islamist parties, even though the latter commanded few votes on their own.
- Since the late 1990s, Islamist militancy has spread throughout the country, raising questions about Bangladesh's internal security and the consequences for South Asian regional security. The serial bombings of August 2006 shocked most observers, even though the massive attack killed only two persons.
- The upcoming January 2007 elections are in many ways a referendum on the two parties' competing visions of Bangladesh and the role of Islam in the public and private spheres. Unfortunately, a number of irregularities in the election preparations call into question their freeness and fairness, threatening civil unrest.
- The attention and dedicated involvement of the international community is paramount to ensure free and fair elections in Bangladesh.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote post-conflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict-management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

### 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**, Vice President of Government Affairs, International Justice Mission, 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 Homer**, 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

## Introduction

A predominantly Muslim country of 142 million people, Bangladesh is an important developing nation struggling to establish, preserve, and consolidate its young and fragile democracy under numerous domestic and regional pressures that threaten to undermine these efforts. Until recently the international community considered Bangladesh as a model for developing Muslim nations because of its presumed commitment to secular democracy and its ostensibly inclusive practice of Islam. In recent years, however, Bangladesh's secular system has come under fierce assault by Islamist militancy. Although political violence has a long history in Bangladesh, Islamist violence does not. Its spread to this strategically located country disquiets citizens and analysts, both inside and outside Bangladesh.

In great measure the fate of Bangladesh as a secular and tolerant Muslim state, and its ability to address issues related to good governance, transparency, accountability, and development, rests upon the upcoming elections, scheduled to take place in late January 2007. Because the two mainstream parties embody contradictory visions of the role of Islam in Bangladesh's past and future, these elections will be a referendum on the parties' competing visions.

What is at stake in these elections, and why should the international community watch them closely?

## What Is at Stake for the Parties and the Polity?

Today Bangladesh is overshadowed by the specter of rising Islamist extremism while its mainstream parties remain preoccupied with their mutual antagonism and the pursuit of power. None of the extant major parties that have been in power since Bangladesh's birth has acted decisively to address the nation's pressing problems and needs, especially the provision of governance, justice, and rule of law. Despite its ethnic and largely sectarian homogeneity, Bangladesh is mired in a struggle between competing visions of the future that retard its economic growth and progress and exacerbate the malaise of poor governance and widespread corruption. The confrontation between government and opposition plays out on the streets through frequent *hartals* (general strikes), which often result in political violence.

This contestation manifests itself in two interrelated ways. First, there is the struggle between defining the Bangladeshi citizen first and foremost as an ethnic Bengali or, alternatively, first and foremost as a Muslim. At the same time Bangladeshis are struggling to decide which version of Islam the country and its polity should embrace as part of a newly reconstructed, Islamist national project. At its heart is the fate of Bangladesh's traditional observance of heterodox Sufi Islamic practice, which has recently given way to more orthodox, Wahhabi and Deobandi interpretations of Islam.

These twin debates over Bangladesh's identity (Bengali vs. Muslim) and Islam (heterodox vs. orthodox) came into focus in the years following Bangladesh's independence in 1971 and continue to permeate national politics. The upcoming 2007 elections will be an important occasion for this contestation. Will Bangladesh continue on the path of secular democracy, or will it embrace political Islam with increasingly apparent Wahhabi and Deobandi overtones as the foundation of the state?

Having held four elections since Bangladeshis wrested democracy from the clutches of the military in November 1990, the country is now gearing up for its third general election under the unique, nonparty caretaker government (NCG) system.

After Gen. Hussain Ershad's downfall in 1990, the participants in the movement against the military set up an interim administration to function as a neutral caretaker government. This body—headed by the then-chief justice with the assistance of a cabinet of neutral, well-respected, and nonpartisan advisers chosen from among nominees put

forward by the major parties—was to hold the first election under the new democratic dispensation within ninety days.

This interim government became the model for the NCG, subsequently promulgated in the thirteenth amendment to the constitution by the short-lived parliament elected in February 1996. Although this was a victory for the opposition parties in alliance against the BNP government then in power, it did not diminish the deep antagonism between the AL and the BNP. On the contrary, the polarization increased and persists, as exemplified by the outbreak of street violence across the country with the departure of the BNP-led government on October 27, 2006, and subsequent unrest.

In the 2001 election the BNP came to power in alliance with the Jatiya Party (Naziur faction, or JP-N),<sup>1</sup> the Jamaat Islami Bangladesh (JIB), and the Islamic Oikyo Jote (IOJ). Of the latter two, the JIB is the more important Islamist party, while the IOJ is a united front of several small parties that would command few votes on their own. Constitutionally the five-year term of the present parliament, and consequently the present government, ended October 27, 2006, when a NCG should have stepped in to conduct elections within ninety days of taking over the government.

However, alleged BNP efforts to manipulate the existing institutions during its term in office inspired a breach of confidence about the institutional neutrality and viability of this NCG system, and these BNP actions have compromised the legitimate handover of power. First, a crisis erupted over who should head the fourth NCG. In the end, the president assumed this role, blurring the separation between the presidency and the head of government. Second, controversy has raged about perceived acts of commission and omission by the chief election commissioner (CEC) and his principal associates in the Election Commission (EC). This breakdown in confidence has put the integrity of the forthcoming elections in peril and encouraged a spate of violence since September 2006. The situation has gained the attention of the international community, which is increasingly focusing on Bangladesh's elections and domestic stability.

Today Bangladesh finds itself at yet another crossroads. The choices its people make—or, more critically, are permitted to make—in coming months will have a great effect on Bangladesh's future. Because politics in Bangladesh has become a zero-sum game with no meaningful political role for the opposition, the stakes are high for both the AL and the BNP. Both these legacy parties view a victory in the elections as absolutely necessary for their continuing survival generally and their present leadership in particular. For the AL—which spearheaded the movement for Bangladesh's independence under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and is now led by his daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wazed—losing in 2007 would constitute a second consecutive defeat and call into question the credibility and survival of its leaders. A defeat in 2007 might even precipitate breakup of the party. Few in the AL, or even outside the party (including pro-BNP elements in society), doubt that the BNP's return to power, with whatever final coalition it would cobble together, would result in significant efforts to vitiate the AL. During the past five years the BNP-led alliance government oversaw what many, particularly the AL, perceived as a systematic war of attrition on the AL to decimate the latter's leadership and organizational structure. Whether such fears are justifiable is not as important as the fact that this perception is deeply entrenched.

For the BNP, victory and retaining power are necessary at all costs. The BNP fears that a defeat might subject its politicians and party workers to AL retribution. Again, it is immaterial whether the AL would actually resort to such action, but this perception is deep-rooted and encourages the BNP and its partners to take risks. The BNP's defeat probably would trigger a power struggle within the party leadership and fragmentation of the party. Significant desertions already have been observed. The new Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) formed on October 26, 2006, with more than a dozen former BNP senior leaders and some 100 defecting workers constituting its core.

The JIB (the largest among the Islamist parties in Bangladesh) has greater cause for concern should it emerge as a loser in the elections. The BNP's latest bargaining with

***Controversy has raged about perceived acts of commission and omission by the chief election commissioner and his principal associates.***

***For the BNP, victory and retaining power are necessary at all costs.***

***Bangladesh has managed its macroeconomy fairly well, with a sustained growth rate of 5 percent over the past decade.***

***Islam, and political Islam in particular, has reasserted itself.***

Gen. Ershad's Jatiya Party (JP) is part of its effort to retain control over the electorate, but its main coalition partner at present, the JIB, deeply resents this move. Whether Gen. Ershad will join the BNP as a coalition partner is a wide-open question, and at the time of writing he has cast his lot, for the time being at least, against the BNP-led alliance and joined the movement for Election Commission reform.

Unfortunately, this consuming struggle between competing visions of how Bangladeshis should define themselves has distracted successive governments and their respective leaders from paying closer attention to good governance, service delivery, and Bangladesh's pervasive corruption. Despite these problems, Bangladesh has managed its macroeconomy fairly well, with a sustained growth rate of 5 percent over the past decade. However, the World Bank contends that without "poor economic and political governance, criminalized law and order, institutionalized corruption, weak financial institutions, and poorly managed infrastructure," Bangladesh easily could have achieved a growth rate of 2 to 5 percent higher.<sup>2</sup> Resolving the political conundrum satisfactorily and restoring the neutrality and credibility of key institutions of the state therefore may be important to securing Bangladesh's future economic development and prosperity.

## **Origins of the Secular and Islamist Divide**

Bengali Muslims participated in, and contributed seminally to, the creation of Pakistan as a separate state in South Asia for the Muslims of British India. Their continued commitment to the idea of Pakistan was critical because the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan constituted a majority of the entire population of the nascent state of Pakistan. However, although the majority of East Pakistanis were Muslims, they held steadfast to their cultural identity as ethnic Bengalis. This adherence to Bengali culture and language was not received well by the Punjabis, who predominated among the Pakistani ruling elite in West Pakistan. After years of perceived negligence, discrimination, and, ultimately, disenfranchisement by West Pakistan, the Bengalis of East Pakistan declared independence. With the assistance of India and after a deadly civil war, East Pakistan became independent Bangladesh in 1971.

The Bangladesh independence movement was a triumph of Bengali ethnicity over the organizing logic of Islam. Since the Islamist parties were collaborators (commonly called *razakars* by the Bangladeshis) with the Pakistani state in resisting the independence movement, political Islam was delegitimized for several years after 1971. Since then, however, Islam, and political Islam in particular, has reasserted itself. Arguably, there are two main reasons for this resurgence. The first stems from the persistent failure to redress the atrocities perpetrated in Bangladesh's liberation struggle. The second relates to evolving efforts to redefine Islam in Bangladesh's domestic political scene. Both factors have contributed significantly to the ever-expanding room for political maneuver for the country's Islamist forces.

## **Justice Denied**

During the 1971 war for Bangladeshi independence, the "occupation" forces of the Pakistani army, as well as collaborating elements among Bengali or non-Bengali residents of East Pakistan, committed atrocities, frequently described as genocidal in scope, against the Bengalis of East Pakistan. The collaborators mostly belonged or owed allegiance to the JIB and other right-wing groups that actively opposed the idea of Bangladesh. As Fakhruddin Ahmed, twice Bangladesh's foreign secretary (1974–76, 1986–87) and later adviser for foreign affairs (foreign minister) in the interim government of 1990–91, has documented in his memoirs, the Bengali victors in the liberation struggle against Pakistan demanded that a war crimes tribunal be set up to try those responsible for these crimes.

The military coup that overthrew the first elected government of Bangladesh and built the foundation of prolonged military or quasi-military rule (1975–1990) gradually permitted most of the collaborators to return to Bangladesh and even rehabilitated some notables among them. They did so despite outcry from a significant section of the population, particularly the secular-oriented sectors. These collaborators have never faced any consequences for the violence they perpetrated and, indeed, remain integrated into Bangladeshi society. This persistent situation antagonizes the survivors of the war and their families. The culture of impunity has served to intensify the contestation for national identity and laid the foundation for the mutual political distrust and animosity that defines the relationship between the various parties and civil society organizations.

***The culture of impunity has laid the foundation for mutual political distrust and animosity.***

## **Contesting Islam's Role in Political Life**

Bangladesh may be uniquely homogeneous as a South Asian nation state, with 98 percent of its population ethnic Bengalis and more than 88 percent Sunni Muslims (with a negligible number of Shias). Even so, its transition to democratization has been compromised by a counterproductive culture of zero-sum oppositional politics between its major political parties. The reintroduction of Islamism as an important personal identifier since 1971 has created a conflict over national identity: Are Bangladeshis Bengalis first or Muslims first? Both Islamism and Bengali ethnonationalism have offered Bangladeshi citizens and parties competing visions for Bangladesh's future. Each change of regime further pollutes the atmosphere and imperils Bangladesh's future as a secular, inclusive, and secure democratic state.

***Are Bangladeshis Bengalis first or Muslims first?***

This struggle has been further complicated by yet another level of contestation over the kind of Islam to be embraced: heterodox Sufi tradition or more orthodox Deobandi and Wahhabi versions.

During the military era the influence of the less tolerant and more orthodox types of Islam (Gulf-backed Wahhabism and Salafism and Pakistan-backed versions of Deobandism) began making steady inroads among Bangladeshis, who traditionally have embraced Sufi traditions. Saudi and Gulf money poured into mosques, charities, social organizations, and madrassahs that promoted Wahhabist and Salafist Islam. Both mainstream parties and their respective leaderships increasingly permitted the expansion of the Gulf-backed Islamist agenda. In their bid to counter the secular AL, as well as each other, the BNP and subsequently Ershad's JP courted the rightist Islamist parties to redefine themselves, not taking into account the long-term consequences of their narrower agenda.

This process of forcibly realigning the polity to the right has taken place within the framework and dynamics of pluralist democracy. In this context the 2007 elections assume critical importance. Whichever alliance wins—the BNP (or what remains of it after recent defections) and its Islamist allies, or the AL and defecting elements from the BNP—may well determine whether Bangladesh will witness further consolidation of the Islamist agenda or a reversion to the politics of the ideological center. This conflict raises the stakes of the zero-sum game to new heights and has brought the opposing forces to the brink of a “war” for survival, with each trying to maximize the means at its disposal to neutralize the other.

***This conflict has brought the opposing forces to the brink of a “war” for survival.***

The zero-sum culture is further exacerbated by the constitutional provision that prohibits party members from voicing dissent against their own party, either in parliament or in public. Crossing the floor is punished by loss of the parliamentary seat and its accompanying privileges and benefits. Outside the parliament, it invites the full wrath of the party's “enforcement” machinery of coercion and physical intimidation that has become so integral a part of the culture of violence. This constitutional provision precludes moderates of both mainstream parties from forging and promoting consensus positions and is a structural factor that reinforces the zero-sum political culture in Bangladesh.

## Worrying Signs Thus Far

No party has a clean record with respect to seeking to manipulate the elections. The AL government had sought to place the person of its choice in the presidency (in 1996) and the NCG (in 2001) and to populate the administration with hand-picked loyalists. All these efforts largely failed.

Ahead of the fourth general elections under the caretaker system, the BNP-led alliance also sought to manipulate the institutions that matter in the election process: the presidency, the NCG, the Election Commission and the bureaucracy. Their efforts to force the president to resign and elect a successor of their choosing failed in the face of mounting public pressure. BNP attempts to put its own candidate at the top of the NCG by manipulating the retirement age of judges also failed, because of the opposition's mobilization *and* because its choice, Justice K.M. Hasan, declined the dubious distinction. To avert a constitutional crisis that portended violence and public chaos, the president became head of the fourth NCG, although this move has not been free of controversy.

Perhaps the most contested act of the outgoing BNP-led coalition government was its appointment of personnel to the Election Commission, in an alleged effort to stack the commission in the BNP's favor. The most provocative step taken by the unpopular and suspect CEC was the development of a new voters' list. At the end of 2006 this controversy had not been resolved. The new list indicates that 90 million people are eligible to vote, some 10 million more than credible demographic estimates. Despite High Court and Supreme Court injunctions directing the EC to revise and update the 2001 list, recent reports suggest that EC's "revised" list is still bloated by 10 million. Various electoral manipulations have prompted public and private criticism by the international community, notably the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, and Australia.

Last but not least, widely publicized reports say the BNP-led alliance government has arbitrarily selected and, against the rules, placed hand-picked bureaucrats and police who will be directly involved in the election process in key positions in the civil administration. These actions were interpreted as evidence of the BNP-led alliance government's bad faith in heavily politicizing the administrative machinery. The opposition has continued to demand sweeping changes and remains dissatisfied with the cosmetic changes the NCG has made.

The first acts of the past three NCGs have been to undo almost all measures put in place by the outgoing government. The fourth NCG is also expected to take sweeping actions. Since 1991 successive presidents have sought to be nonpartisan despite their election by the parliament, reflecting the preferences of the ruling party. It remains to be seen whether this time these institutions will reassert their neutrality and essential integrity, thus reassuring all parties, or whether the changes effected earlier will favor the BNP and its allies. The president's initial actions as head of the NCG have served to cast considerable doubt on his remaining totally nonpartisan. At the time of writing this report, it was unclear if his subsequent actions would move him closer to neutrality, if not nonpartisanship, and thus redeem his tarnished image.

## Response of Civil Society and the Opposition

An important element in the ongoing political drama that is vital to Bangladesh's transition to democracy is its fairly vociferous civil society. Numerous civil society organizations have been demanding that the two parties undertake a dialogue and arrive at a consensus for addressing the ills that plague the nation, not least among them the lack of good governance, endemic corruption, neglect of the public welfare, and the looming danger of terrorism. Realizing that the outcome of the next elections will be critical in determining the future course of the country, various groups and the independent media have called for resolving the lingering crisis surrounding the composition of the NCG, completely

***Various electoral manipulations have prompted public and private criticism by the international community.***

***An important element vital to Bangladesh's transition to democracy is its fairly vociferous civil society.***

revamping the Election Commission, and removing partisans from the administrative machinery. All these proposals were designed to exert moral pressure on the BNP-led alliance government to relent and set the stage for truly free and fair elections, as well as on the opposition groups to be reasonable in their demands.

The collective voice of civil society's numerous organizations, specifically addressing problems related to good governance and free and fair elections, unexpectedly gained critical traction when the founder and head of the Grameen Bank, Dr. Mohammed Yunus, was awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. For some time Yunus has been one of the leading voices in civil society calling for free and fair election practices, selection of honest candidates with clean records by all the parties, and public discernment in electing leaders.

Faced with spiraling violence that broke out following the political impasse over the formation of the NCG before the president stepped in to take charge, these organizations continued to call for restoration of sanity and peace. However, as long as the two mainstream parties are locked in brinksmanship, the situation will remain volatile. The real test for civil society will be if the antagonists heed civil society's collective voice and step back from the precipice, enabling Bangladeshis to find a solution that will avert further civil strife.

***As long as the two mainstream parties are locked in brinksmanship, the situation will remain volatile.***

## **Securing the 2007 Election and Bangladesh's Future**

What needs to be done to secure the next election in the short run and Bangladesh's future as a stable, moderate, and progressive democracy in the long term?

### ***Securing the next elections***

Ensuring that the elections are held freely and fairly is obviously the first priority. Compromised elections would jeopardize peaceful democratic transition in Bangladesh and result in continuing political violence and social turmoil. Such a scenario would give even greater political space to Islamist extremists, militants, and criminals, with serious consequences for Bangladesh's continued economic development, as well as its domestic stability and the security of the entire South Asian region. To secure the forthcoming elections, Bangladeshis must address the following issues immediately, and the international community must support them in achieving these goals:

- **Ensuring the neutrality of the NCG.** All sectors of society must perceive this body as incontrovertibly neutral and a fair and trustworthy umpire in the forthcoming elections. The president's assumption of the role of NCG chief adviser and his subsequent actions have heightened suspicions that he values BNP party loyalty over the country's overall interests. Because the NCG is respected and has behaved generally with some measure of bipartisanship and neutrality, this institution may be critical in salvaging the public's confidence in the EC. The president must consult with it more transparently in decision making and delegate more meaningful authority and responsibilities to it than he has thus far. Despite these handicaps, the advisers have played a very commendable role in trying to resolve thorny issues related to the reconstitution of the Election Commission.
- **Restoring the credibility of the Election Commission.** As constituted during the time of the BNP-led regime, the EC lacked credibility as a result of some suspect actions by the CEC. To perform its functions and duties as enjoined by the constitution, the EC must regain credibility with the public. The CEC's departure is only the first step in the process. Consensus has to be forged on the issues of his succession, reconstitution of the body and its secretariat, and the controversial voters' list. This may mean postponing the elections to permit the EC to complete its work satisfactorily.

***Compromised elections would result in continuing political violence and social turmoil.***

*The international community must consider expanding and improving upon previous efforts to ensure maximally free and fair elections.*

- **Diminishing politicization of government bureaucracies.** The systematic politicization of the bureaucracy has been widely reported in the media. Administrative personnel involved in the elections must act with neutrality and nonpartisanship.
- **Broadening and enlarging the international community's role.** The international community must sustain its efforts to encourage all parties to forge a broad-based consensus on contentious election issues. It also must consider expanding and improving upon previous efforts to ensure maximally free and fair elections. In past elections coordination among domestic and international monitoring missions was inadequate. In this election it is critical for the various organizations to coordinate their activities and field a substantially larger number of observers than in previous years.
- **Encouraging earlier-than-usual arrival of international election observers.** Observers should arrive earlier than they have in the past and attend detailed coordination sessions with local partners. If feasible, more local civil society organizations need to be mobilized for election monitoring. Organizations that are monitoring the elections should, in concert, devise a list of vulnerable constituencies (particularly minorities and other disadvantaged groups that have been disenfranchised in past elections) and put into a place a systematic plan for watching these constituencies more closely than before. In many cases, they have already been identified by international organizations like the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, as well as by local organizations.
- **Ensuring more resources and technical support.** During the elections, the government will shut down all cell phones and ban all satellite phones. These actions will compel election monitors to rely upon undependable land lines that may not be available near polling stations. Observers, both local and foreign, will need access to adequate resources and to technical and logistical support for quick and effective mobility. They will also need reliable communications to instantly report any observed breach of the rules.

### *Securing the future*

Over the past fifteen years it has become clear that contentious zero-sum politics have become intensely polarized, preventing political parties from arriving at consensus on fundamental measures required to stabilize core state institutions and shield them from partisan contention. Unless these issues are addressed, simply securing the 2007 elections cannot ensure Bangladesh's future as a moderate, secular democracy.

Given this zero-sum mentality, Bangladesh's political system and culture require reform to ensure the state's long-term stability. Is this perhaps the time for the new institution of the NCG to assume a more proactive role as umpire to the nation's polity?

This provocative question is motivated by the inescapable truth that successive governments, notwithstanding their repeated commitments before every election, have failed to strengthen the core institutions of the state. Unless the political culture changes dramatically, Bangladeshis may seek alternatives to the mainstream political parties for meaningful change.

Public opinion in Bangladesh overwhelmingly supported the three caretaker governments since 1990. Despite the controversial circumstances under which the fourth NCG formed, initial reports suggested that its members enjoyed a modicum of respect and confidence across society and were seen as honorable and neutral, if not entirely nonpartisan. However, some of its members' actions or statements may have diminished that perception of neutrality. Nevertheless, with some herculean efforts to credibly reconstitute the Election Commission, prospects for a reasonably free and fair election might improve.

If the present NCG can restore and sustain its image of neutrality, it may consider making some important policy decisions to strengthen the most important institutions of

*Simply securing the 2007 elections cannot ensure Bangladesh's future as a moderate, secular democracy.*



the state. If the NCG agrees to a more proactive role, then the following might be the most important steps to secure Bangladesh's democratic peace, political stability, and economic security.

1. **Separation of the judiciary** from the executive to ensure independence of the former institution. The third NCG sought to separate the judiciary from the executive but ultimately failed to do so, despite repeated calls by the Supreme Court.
2. **Depoliticization of the bureaucracy** and restoration of its professionalism.
3. **Depoliticization of the Anti-Corruption Commission** to ensure its independence and efficacy.
4. **Adoption of a freedom of information law** to lend transparency to governance.
5. **Establishment of a truth and reconciliation body** with moral rather than judicial jurisdiction, to examine crimes against humanity committed during the war of liberation. The deep-rooted animosity between fighters for an independent Bangladesh and those who fought against Bangladesh remains imbedded in politics, exacerbating the zero-sum game (Jahan, 2005: 80). The collective resolution of the events of 1971 would enable the nation and its people to move forward with nation building and state consolidation.
6. **Restoration to individual parliament members the right to vote on issues according to their conscience.** Even if such votes were to go against their party's official line, members should not fear recrimination or loss of their seats. Bangladesh can hope to consolidate its democracy only if the respective parties adopt a transparent, democratic internal process.

All these issues are critically important for securing the nation's long-term future. Enough time has been lost to internal feuding and procrastinating; the issues must be addressed immediately. If the political parties will not address them, the NCG is the only other body constitutionally authorized to take them up. In fact, the constitution's thirteenth amendment includes a doctrine of necessity, which permits the NCG to pursue its own policies if it deems such actions necessary for the well-being of the state. The NCG also represents a national consensus by virtue of the manner in which it is constituted. In light of the culture that impels each party to viscerally oppose whatever the other proposes to undertake, NCG action would liberate politics from the constraints that prevent the parties from executing their well-intentioned but often unfulfilled promises. It also would enable them to focus on delivery of good governance and the essential public goods and services craved by the citizens but in such short supply.

## Conclusion

Bangladeshis' ability to address these governance issues and resolve the current crisis will largely determine whether Bangladesh makes the transition to a viable democracy. The mainstream parties must transcend their brinkmanship and instead demonstrate leadership and willingness to tackle the most pressing matters confronting the Bangladeshi state and people. Failure to address these important issues of governance and democracy may cede further space to extremist forces, with potentially grave ramifications for the security and stability of the nation, the region, and the world.

*The collective resolution of the events of 1971 would enable the nation and its people to move forward.*

*The mainstream parties must demonstrate willingness to tackle the most pressing matters confronting the Bangladeshi state and people.*

## Notes

1. A breakaway faction of the original party founded by Gen. Ershad. Earlier in 1999 he had forged a coalition with the BNP, but when he decided to break from this coalition, his party splintered. The Naziur faction remained a part of the electoral alliance with the BNP and has been part of the BNP-led, four-party alliance government since 2001.

2. Statement by Christine I. Wallich, chair, Local Consultative Group, and World Bank country director for Bangladesh, May 8, 2004, in Dhaka.

## Bibliography

Ahmed, A.F. Salahuddin. *Bengali Nationalism and the Emergence of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: International Center for Bengal Studies, 1994.

———. and Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury, eds. *Bangladesh—National Culture and Heritage*. Dhaka: Independent University, 2004.

Ahmed, Fakhruddin. *Critical Times—Memoirs of a Diplomat*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1994.

———. *The Caretakers, A First-Hand Account of the Interim Government of Bangladesh (1990–91)*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1998.

Grare, Frederic. *Political Islam in the Indian Subcontinent—The Jamaat-i-Islami*. Manohar: Centre de sciences humaines, 2001.

Hasanuzzaman, Al Masud. *Role of Opposition in Bangladesh Politics*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1998.

Islam, Sirajul, ed. *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, 10 vols. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003. [www.Banglapedia.org](http://www.Banglapedia.org).

Jahan, Rounaq. *Bangladesh Politics—Problems and Issues*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2005.

Joshi, Pooja. *Jamaat-i-Islami*. Delhi: Kalinga Publications, 2003.

Karim, S.A. *Sheikh Mujib, Triumph and Tragedy*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2005.

Khan, Akbar Ali. *Discovery of Bangladesh: Explorations into Dynamics of a Hidden Nation*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2001.

Muhith, A.M.A. *Bangladesh, Emergence of a Nation*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1992.

Riaz, Ali. *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

United Nations Development Program. *Beyond Hartals: Towards Democratic Dialogue in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: United Nations Development Program, 2005. [www.un-bd.org/undp](http://www.un-bd.org/undp).

Wallich, Christine I. "Statement at Bangladesh Development Forum: Statement on Behalf of the Local Consultative Group," May 8, 2004. [www.web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/contentMDK:20200590~menuPK:34472~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html](http://www.web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/contentMDK:20200590~menuPK:34472~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html).

Zaheer, Hasan. *The Separation of East Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994.



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

## Of Related Interest

A number of other publications from the United States Institute of Peace examine issues related to Bangladesh.

### *Recent Institute reports include*

- *The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, by Sumit Ganguly (Special Report, August 2006)
- *Bangladesh: Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Crisis*, by C. Christine Fair and Kerem Levitas (USIPeace Briefing, May 2005)

To obtain an Institute report (available free of charge), write United States Institute of Peace, 1200 17th Street NW, Suite 200, Washington DC 20036-3011; call (202) 429-6063; or e-mail [usip\\_requests@usip.org](mailto:usip_requests@usip.org).



**United States  
Institute of Peace**

1200 17th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036

[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)