

# Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know

By C. Christine Fair Sunday, January 28, 2018, 10:00 AM

*Editor's Note: Despite the size of its population and growing importance, Bangladesh gets little attention in policy circles. This is true even though radical terrorist groups like the Islamic State are making inroads there. To help remedy this neglect, my Georgetown colleague Christine Fair presents an overview of Islamism in Bangladesh and assesses the terrorism threat there today.*

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On 12 December, a 27-year old named Akayed Ullah attempted—but failed—to set off a pipe bomb in the New York City subway. He hailed from Bangladesh, a country that few Americans had ever heard of. While Ullah may be the one of the first Bangladeshi terrorists to make the front page of American newspapers, he may not be the last. Bangladesh may be an important source of future jihadi manpower.

## The Bangladeshi “Success Story”

Scholars, commentators, and policymakers alike have generally held that Bangladesh is a success story of a moderate, secular, Muslim democracy; however, this view never rested on strong empirical ground. Indeed, since Bangladesh’s independence from Pakistan in 1971, the durability of both secularism and democracy have been undermined by numerous military coups—many of which involved multiple counter-coups before a clear “victor” emerged—in 1974-75, 1977-1980, 1981-82, 1996, and 2007. In January 2012, the military claimed it had thwarted another coup.

Bangladesh’s two mainstream political parties are known more for their rivalry, corruption, and incompetence than for governance. Since independence, Bangladesh has experienced creeping Islamism that continues to enjoy popular support. More worrisome yet, Bangladesh is increasingly the site of Islamist violence. Between January 2005 and December 2017, some 746 people have died in Islamist terrorist attacks, including 339 alleged terrorists; of those attacks, 91 percent have taken place since 2013. That the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) claim many of these recent attacks casts a pall over Bangladesh’s ostensible success.

Despite these troubling signs, security professionals and analysts have neglected Bangladesh. This is puzzling: Bangladesh has one of the world’s largest Muslim populations with more than 141 million Muslims, in addition to another 17 million non-Muslims. Bangladesh’s Muslim population is comparable to the combined populaces of Iran (82 million), Afghanistan (34 million), and Saudi Arabia (29 million). But it is also one of the world’s least developed countries: Bangladesh ranks 139th out of 190 countries according to the United Nations Human Development Index. Its citizens view their country as plagued by corruption, ranking 145th out of 167 countries in Transparency International’s 2016 Corruption Perception Index. Bangladesh is an important provider of global security, and is consistently one of the largest contributors to United Nations Peacekeeping Missions. While not a top-tier military, its military forces are ranked 57th out of 133, using an index that considers the forces’ end-strength, diversity, and number of weapons systems as measures of national power. Despite these fairly impressive figures, Bangladesh has remained ignored in scholarly and policy analytic circles.

## Bangladesh: Between Secularism and Islamism Since 1947

In 1947, the British divided the erstwhile Raj into India and Pakistan after Muslim League activists demanded a separate Muslim state by mobilizing the “Two Nation Theory,” which held that Muslims could not live with security and dignity in a Hindu-dominated, democratic India. The Pakistan that emerged had two wings, East and West, separated by the expanse of India. East Pakistan was ethnically homogenous, dominated by a Bengali ethnic majority, and nearly a quarter of the population were Hindu. In contrast, West Pakistan was ethnically diverse but had less religious diversity. West Pakistan deployed political Islam to suppress ethnic aspirations in both wings of the nascent state. After enduring decades of economically extractive and discriminatory policies, Bengalis in the east launched a civil war to wrest an independent state. West Pakistan used Islamist militias under the control of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) as well as the armed forces to brutally suppress Bengali agitators. Approximately three million people died in the conflict, and millions more were displaced. Many of the perpetrators of extreme violence were associated with the JeI, which aided the Pakistani army to commit atrocities against civilians in East Pakistan. Finally, in December 1971, with Indian assistance, the Bengali freedom fighters (*mukti bahini*) secured an independent Bangladesh.

Bangladesh’s government, under the political leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (“Mujib”) and his party, the Awami League (AL), established secularism as a state principle. Mujib’s government outlawed the JeI (now known as Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, or BJeI) for its wartime crimes against Bengalis. The current AL Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is fulfilling a long-standing promise to prosecute BJeI activists, among others, in a controversial war crimes tribunal. Her government has carried out several death sentences accordingly.

Over time, the resurgent importance of Bangladeshis’ personal identity as Muslim made it difficult for the government to maintain its commitment to secularism. While secularism allowed citizens to separate their identities as Bangladeshis (distinct from Bengalis in India) on the one hand and as Muslims on the other, it did not eliminate the importance of personal faith, and openly criticizing Islam was politically unpopular. The role of Islam deepened as Mujib sought to secure the support of other Muslim countries to rebuild the war-torn country and burnish his legitimacy; however, most Muslim states saw Bengali independence as a means to destroy Pakistan and divide the Muslim world. In 1973, Mujib mustered considerable efforts during a meeting of the Non-Alignment Movement in Algiers to obtain formal recognition and eventual support of several Arab countries. Wary of losing newfound aid from the Islamic bloc, Mujib abjured criticizing Islam aggressively and became more permissive of Islamist movements. Despite the efforts of some Bangladeshi politicians to firmly embed secularism in Bangladeshi society and systems of education, Bangladeshis increasingly equated secularism with dishonoring Islam and tantamount to dependence upon India.

Religious schools, the media, and the ubiquity of Islam in family and social life subsequently contributed to a growing consensus in support of Islam and away from secularism. As skepticism towards secularism grew “political parties and leaders competed with one another to be in tune with the society and its rulers, thus strengthening Islam as a factor in the power struggle in Bangladesh.” Mujib was assassinated during an August 1975 military coup. Khandakar Moshtaque Ahmen

became president for less than three months before a counter-coup brought Major General Ziaur Rahman (usually called Ziaur) to power in late 1975. He remained in power until 1981.

Bangladesh's external ties to Arab Gulf states intensified under Ziaur's tenure. To establish more productive ties with Muslim states and to woo Saudi Arabia, Ziaur made crucial constitutional changes. He inserted a clause into Article 25 of the 1972 constitution that formally stated Bangladesh's solidarity with other Muslim countries. He also reversed the country's secular orientation by changing the constitution in 1977 to remove the preamble's reference to secularism in favor of the words "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah." In 1978, he founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as an alternative to the AL and promoted Bangladeshi nationalism, which was "explicitly Islamic in character," instead of the AL's secular Bengali nationalism. Between 1976 and 1979, Ziaur also legalized religious political parties and allowed the Islamists who had worked with the Pakistani Army during the liberation war to participate in government again. BJeI was able to publicly rejoin Bangladeshi politics in 1979. By the time Ziaur was assassinated in 1981, reliance on Islam to build nationalism and bolster the government's legitimacy was commonplace.

General Hossain Mohammad Ershad (Ershad), Bangladesh's second military dictator, who was in power from 1982 until 1990, continued consolidating Bangladesh's ties with Muslim countries and extended Ziaur's project of embedding Islam in Bangladesh's governance. He made Islam Bangladesh's state religion and he revived BJeI as a legitimate political actor. Ershad even appointed two BJeI war criminals to cabinet positions.

In 1990 democracy returned with a BNP electoral victory. The chasm between the religious Bangladeshi nationalism propounded by the BNP and the secular Bengali nationalism espoused by the AL widened in subsequent years. Both parties boycotted parliament at different times to undermine the elected government of the competition and, when out of power, have used *hartals* (total strikes across the country which impose enormous economic costs and often turn violent) to destabilize the other in power. Since 1990, Bangladesh's civil societies and political actors have struggled to define the role of Islam within the polity and the state, with proponents of secularism pitted against those who want to see greater formalization of Islam in state and society. Critically, with the country nearly split in its support for two parties, neither party can win an election without coalitions. This has made BJeI an important kingmaker that can extort political gains in exchange for its coalition support. Electoral politics have thus empowered the BJeI as both parties tried to align with it to augment their own political power.

Three complex international developments also enabled the growth of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. First, during the 1980s, some Bangladeshis participated—and more importantly, learned to fight—in the "jihad" to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan. Returning militants brought with them their new knowledge of insurgent warfare and jihadist ideology to Bangladesh. Second, in the early 1980s, Muslim ethnic Rohingyas formed the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) in the wake of a massive military operation waged by the Myanmar military that drove some 200,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. The RSO enjoyed explicit support from the BJeI. While the size of this organization remains debated, analysts assess that "small numbers" of Rohingya militants continued to train in remote bases in Bangladesh opposite Myanmar's Maungdaw district until the 1990s. In very limited numbers, Rohingyas became sources of recruitment for different Islamist militant groups, including the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda, detailed below. Third, Bangladesh became one of the regional hubs which Pakistan has used to train, hide, and dispatch Islamist terror groups into India for over a decade.

### Islamist Militant Milieu in Bangladesh

BJeI, Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, aims to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic country. The BJeI has attracted episodic international scrutiny since 2001 due to its deep involvement in numerous terror attacks targeting Hindus, Ahmedis, and AL and liberal activists in Bangladesh. BJeI's student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) or Jamaat-Shibir, has also been involved in these attacks. For example, in 2015, Shibir destroyed about 50 shops in a northern village, forcing Hindu residents to flee.

Another important Islamist group is the Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMB), which is closely related to the Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). (The two groups have been virtually the same since they came under the leadership of Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqur Rahman, aka "Bangla Bhai.") The JMB perpetrated many attacks in the early 2000s, including a shocking August 2005 attack in which the group set off 459 bombs simultaneously in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts to push the country into adopting Sharia law. JMB has also been linked to recent violence, including an incident in Dinajpur at the end of 2015 in which an Italian Catholic priest was attacked.

Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) was founded in 1992 and facilitated the development of many other Islamist groups in the country. Analysts believe that HuJI-B perpetrated some of the earliest Islamist terrorist actions in Bangladesh. These include the 1993 death threats against the feminist author Taslima Nasreen, who had to leave Bangladesh after a \$5,000 bounty was put on her head, and the attempts to assassinate both Shamshur Rahman, a famed secular poet, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Many of HuJI-B's members came from or were trained by foreign militants, especially fighters from the war in Afghanistan. In its early years, Osama bin Laden funded the group.

Many Rohingyas also closely collaborated with and even trained HuJI-B members in the 1990s. HuJI-B recruited members from Rohingya communities in southeastern Bangladesh, assigning them to perform the riskiest fighting jobs, doing tasks such as carrying equipment or removing mines. The relationship between the RSO and Bangladeshi Islamist groups like HuJI-B and the JMB ultimately proved beneficial to both sides: The JMB, for example, taught Rohingyas to build and detonate bombs, while Rohingya experts trained JMB members in the use of small arms.

In addition to these Bangladeshi groups, the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) organized many terrorist attacks in both Bangladesh and India, though it is most renowned for its November 2008 assault on multiple targets in the Indian mega-city of Mumbai. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State (IS) have increased their activity in Bangladesh in recent years. IS has taken responsibility for attacks on foreigners, homosexuals, Shia, Ahmadis, Sufis, and other religious minorities, among other groups. Islamist militants have targeted secular writers and bloggers in particular, with an online "hit list." Dozens of Bangladeshis, including persons of Bangladeshi extraction in the United Kingdom, have gone to fight with the Islamic State, and in April 2016, the organization's English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, offered a tribute to a Bangladeshi militant who died in Syria.

In addition, AQIS has taken responsibility for several murders, including the killing of secular publishers and bloggers, at least one of whom was American. Some of these murders were committed by Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), a banned Bangladeshi Islamist group that first gained attention in 2013, on behalf of AQIS. ABT, which has also called itself Ansar al-Islam and Ansar Bangla 7, is affiliated with al-Qaeda. , AQIS has launched its own efforts to focus on Bangladesh and other parts of South Asia.

The differences between the groups are important. Over the course of several trips to Bangladesh, I have learned that AQIS tends to recruit poorly educated young men from seminaries (madaris), whereas IS attracts better educated, affluent young men. One Bangladeshi IS recruit, who appeared in a 2016 video extolling the jihad in Bangladesh, was Tahmid Rahman Shafi, a finalist on Bangladesh's NTV music show in 1995. As one Bangladeshi intelligence official quipped: AQIS is your uncle's terrorist organization and lacks the flashy appeal of IS. Despite these claims by IS and AQIS, Bangladesh's government has insisted that these groups do not have a presence in the country. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina denies the presence of AQIS and IS on Bangladeshi soil and instead alleges that the BNP and BJeI are conducting these attacks "to destabilize the country." Despite Hasina's ostensibly secular reputation, she has demurred from explicitly condemning the killing of secular activists and minorities and has even blamed the victims for provoking the terrorists with their controversial speech.

### What Does the Future Hold?

Fortunately, to date, Bangladeshi terrorists have largely been incompetent. While there have been more than 114 terrorist attacks that can be attributed to Islamists in Bangladesh since 2000, their victim yields are low: They generally only kill one person per attack. In nearby Pakistan, terrorists routinely kill dozens of persons per attack. Moreover, until 2017, suicide bombing was extremely uncommon in Bangladesh. This is likely why so few have bothered with Bangladesh. If Bangladeshi terrorists killed with the same lethality as their Pakistani counterparts, I suspect more Americans would be alarmed. But there is evidence that Bangladeshi terrorists are upping their game.

For example, between 2005 and 2015, Bangladesh experienced only 4 suicide attacks, but 2017 saw as many suicide attacks in a single year. Whereas Islamist groups in South Asia have avoided using women, Bangladesh has suffered a spate of female suicide bombers.

Then there is the burgeoning Rohingya crisis. While this is not the first time Rohingyas have flocked to Bangladesh, the scale of the human suffering and the brutality of forces in Myanmar is unprecedented. In 2005, tens of thousands of Rohingyas made their way to Bangladesh to escape the junta's violence. Even though that period was a heyday for Bangladeshi groups like the JMB and many worried that Rohingyas would join in droves, they did not. But many things have changed since 2005. For one thing, Bangladesh is clearly in the crosshairs of IS and AQIS, both of which have local collaborators in the country. Both AQIS and IS have specifically identified the Rohingyas in their media as important loci of actions. Other regional terrorist actors such as the LeT (through its various purportedly humanitarian front organizations) are also deeply involved with the Rohingya. Equally important, the Islamist militancy inside Myanmar itself that manifested itself in December 2016 was also unprecedented and enjoyed support from the Rohingya diaspora in the Gulf and elsewhere. While the vast majority of Rohingya refugees will surely remain preoccupied with basic survival, others may find Islamist militancy to be gainful, particularly if outside actors are truly seeking to militarize the Rohingyas, as some reports suggest. For now, the idea of the militarized Rohingyas seems to be a creation of the Myanmar government, which wants to justify the genocide it is waging against the Rohingya.

Unfortunately, the Sheikh Hasina government has bumbled in its handling in this emerging threat. Rather than addressing the actual international terrorist organizations in Bangladesh, Hasina has remained steadfastly interested in clinging to power at all costs. She remains focused on BJeI and her BNP rivals, and has used "terrorism" as an excuse to crack down on her real and imaginary political rivals and to render the country an autocracy dominated by her and her Awami League, much as her father did. While Hasina harasses and disappears her critics with an eye to capturing the 2019 elections, an array of Islamist militant organizations are organizing in her midst and preparing to fight jihads both near and far.

The options for the United States are not terrific. Bangladesh would most certainly partner with the Americans to eliminate a potential terrorist. In fact, Bangladeshi security forces have been too eager to engage in the use of force and are accused of numerous human rights violations. The Americans who interact with Bangladesh on policing and military matters, in fact, find that Bangladesh is an eager collaborator on issues pertaining to Islamist terrorism because Hasina has used this phenomenon as an excuse to eliminate her rivals as well as her critics. Where the United States is unable to get traction is on governance, democratization, and electoral transparency, as these are at odds with Hasina's own political aspirations of ruling the country unchallenged. Yet it is in these interstices where the allure of terrorism likely lies.

### Additional Resources:

"Who Supports Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh? What the Data Say," C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, Rebecca Heller, Politics and Religion, published online June 21, 2017.

"Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh Public Awareness and Attitudes," C. Christine Fair and Wahid Abdallah, RESOLVE Network Research Brief No. 4, Bangladesh Research Series September 2017.

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