

constraints, became “an important voice for moderation in Indonesian Islam” and, in the end, did not become “a major force for reform or religious and social liberalization” in the contemporary period.

This volume convinces readers that Asian histories of religious pluralism and tolerance of diversity offer enduring legacies upon which religiously and ethically complex postcolonial Asian states might build prosperous, democratic, and equal societies.

ROBERT NICHOLS

*Richard Stockton College*

*Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web.* By ALI RIAZ.  
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Following 9/11, Bangladesh surfaced as a destination for al Qaeda and Taliban fugitives fleeing Afghanistan. These concerns were bolstered by the October 2001 elections, in which the right-of-center Bangladesh National Party (BNP) came to power with the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). Observers began untangling the ties among Bangladesh-based militants and those in India and Pakistan. Many analysts dismissed warnings of Islamist militancy, citing Bangladesh's development advances (especially among females), economic accomplishments, strong Sufi traditions, staunchly secular and nationalist independence movement, and bona fides as a successful Muslim democracy. Dhaka outright denied that Islamist militant groups existed, a claim that was obviated in August 2005, when two militant groups detonated more than 450 bombs across the country in less than an hour. The state and the international community were forced to reckon with the facts.

Ali Riaz's scholarship has carefully detailed the predictable rise of Islamism and Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. Riaz's most recent offering, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web*, documents a complex system of Islamist actors—including militants—and their import for Bangladesh's future and regional security. Riaz painstakingly assembles information that he has gleaned from his own fieldwork over several years as well as media and other accounts about the number of Islamist militant groups, their leadership, their inventory of human and other resources, and their aims. Given the challenges of collecting information of this kind, Riaz is forthright in acknowledging his potential empirical weaknesses. Nonetheless, Riaz offers a benchmark study that exceeds any comparable product.

Riaz argues forcefully that despite the recent attention that this issue has garnered, Islamist militancy in Bangladesh has developed over the decade due to a confluence of domestic, regional, and international factors that explain the ability of Islamist militant groups to thrive in modern-day Bangladesh. First, Bangladesh's domestic politics have created a permissive environment for their

proliferation of militancy. With Bangladeshi voters dismayed by the personality cults of the two national parties, the BNP and the left-of-center Awami League (AL), democratically organized Islamist parties such as the JI offer some appeal. As neither the AL nor the BNP can form a government on its own, Islamist parties have become kingmakers in Bangladesh's "first past the post" system, with both parties vying for Islamist parties' support. This has allowed Islamists to wield power that far exceeds their strength at the ballot box. To cultivate Islamist parties and their sympathizers, even the AL has sought to dampen its traditionally secular focus and adopt Islamist rhetoric and symbols. Second, the absence of state institutions throughout the country has permitted the groups to take root and thrive without meaningful opposition from civil society or law enforcement agencies. Third, militants and their patrons have forged a new popular culture by appropriating traditional Bangladeshi cultural practices in effort to glorify and promote jihad and other Islamist and militant ideals. Fourth, Islamist militant groups have received outside state and nonstate support. Riaz, perhaps contentiously, argues that Bangladesh has become a new site of proxy war where India and Pakistan vie for influence.

After the 2005 bombing, the government cracked down on groups, arresting key leadership and summarily condemning several leaders to death. In March 2007, six key leaders were executed after the Supreme Court upheld their sentences. Following the "army coup" in early 2007, the military used the militant threat to crack down on militant groups and other potential adversaries. With no serious terrorist attack occurring since August 2005, questions persist about the nature of Bangladesh's Islamist threat. Riaz cautions against insouciance. According to his sources, militant leaders claim anywhere between 10,000 and 15,000 cadres and Bangladesh's militant ranks claim about 2,800 fighters from the "Afghan War." Militant leaders have also confessed to more than twenty-one training camps across the country. (Riaz notes that these numbers cannot be confirmed and may be severely exaggerated.) Equally disconcerting is their penetration into mainstream politics, having cultivated sympathies and even support from some corners of the BNP. Riaz offers cautionary insights about roles of the JI and the Islami Oikya Jote as powerbrokers, a fact that discomfits Riaz, as the growing Islamist militancy is inherently linked to these groups. Riaz argues for an urgent examination of dysfunctional mainstream politics that have enabled militancy; a critical reformation of law enforcement and related agencies to contend with the immediate threat, and international efforts to both buttress secularism in Bangladesh and to discourage international adventurism by its near and far neighbors.

This book competently addresses serious empirical lacunae in the terrorism and security literatures, helps explain the rise of Islamism in a critical yet poorly understood South Asian country, and contributes to much-needed scholarship on contemporary Bangladesh. It should command the attention in scholars across these disparate disciplines.

C. CHRISTINE FAIR

*RAND* Note: The views in this essay reflect those of the author and not those of RAND.