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### Bangladesh On the Brink

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

These terrorists have targeted secular artists and intellectuals, Sufi shrines, the minuscule Ahamaddiya community, and key members of the opposition. In August 2005, within an hour's span, Islamist militants detonated hundreds of small bombs across the country and demanded that Bangladesh become an Islamic state based on Shariah. While some of the most notorious Islamist militants were detained, key members of Harkat-ul-Jihad-Bangladesh and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh remain at large.

#### Full Text (581 words)

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And Sumit Ganguly

With the world's attention focused on whether accountable government can take root in Iraq, the democratic life blood of a much larger Muslim country -- Bangladesh -- is seeping away with hardly a murmur from the international community. Home to 147 million people and once considered a stable, secular Muslim democracy, Bangladesh is becoming a de facto military-controlled state.

Earlier this month, scheduled elections were cancelled and a state of emergency was imposed when the caretaker government stepped down under military pressure. The government is now headed by Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former World Bank official, along with 10 advisors and no functioning parliament. Mr. Ahmed has pledged to hold elections soon, but all indications suggest that the army is in control. While some foreign and domestic observers are optimistic that the army can clean up the corruption and dysfunctional political structure, this is wishful -- even dangerous -- thinking. The international community must act immediately to compel Dhaka to lift the state of emergency, restore full rights, withdraw the army from the political arena, and establish a specific date for credible elections.

Some 60,000 troops have been deployed in recent weeks and more than 2,000 people have been detained. With a history of prolonged military rule since gaining independence from Pakistan, the army's political adventurism is unlikely to rehabilitate Bangladesh's feeble democracy. The international community has not learned from Pervez Musharraf's similar experiment in Pakistan. Under Gen. Musharraf, democracy has not flourished and the political parties have not become more competent.

The roots of Bangladesh' problems run deep. The political system has been destroyed by an acrimonious power struggle between the Bangladesh National Party, led by the most recent prime minister, Khaleda Zia, and the opposition Awami League, led by the former PM, Sheikh Hasina Wajed. Both have prioritized personal gain above the needs of the state. They have forged Faustian bargains with Islamist groups to maximize their chances of victory. Since

the 2001 elections, Islamist parties have become king-makers and enjoy some ministerial positions, which are not earned by their electoral strength. Some of these parties have been linked to terrorist groups.

These terrorists have targeted secular artists and intellectuals, Sufi shrines, the minuscule Ahamaddiya community, and key members of the opposition. In August 2005, within an hour's span, Islamist militants detonated hundreds of small bombs across the country and demanded that Bangladesh become an Islamic state based on Shariah. While some of the most notorious Islamist militants were detained, key members of Harkat-ul-Jihad-Bangladesh and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh remain at large.

Bangladesh is responsive to public exhortation and receives significant international aid. Donor countries can achieve leverage if they coordinate and render some forms of assistance conditional. Multilateral agencies can pressure Dhaka by convening high-profile meetings to discuss democracy. Some bilateral programs, such as U.S. aid to security forces, are subject to the provisions of the Leahy amendment, which restricts aid when there are human-rights abuses. Public discussions of the Leahy requirements may exert pressure on those institutions that value U.S. security programs. Finally, the U.S. and the Commonwealth (of which Bangladesh is a member) have a suite of punitive measures should there be martial law. The army must be reminded of this to discourage any extraconstitutional action -- and to teach it that the suppression of democracy cannot be a cost-free business.

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