

Bangladesh Extremist Islamist Consolidation

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Following several articles in the international media about the role played by religious extremists in Bangladesh¹ – both as a domestic political factor and as hosts for international terrorists escaping the conflict in Afghanistan – the government in Dhaka has reacted by totally denying all such reports². The response is understandable given Bangladesh's heavy dependence on foreign aid, primarily from the West. Bangladesh cannot afford to be seen as a haven for Islamist fanatics and terrorists. But, at the same time, it is undeniable that Bangladesh, over the past decade, has gone through a fundamental political and social transformation. A new brand of nationalism with an Islamist flavour is gradually replacing secular Bengali nationalism as the basis for Bangladesh's nationhood. Furthermore, intelligence officers, local journalists and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) have managed to locate several terrorist training camps in the country, mainly in the lawless southeast bordering Burma.

Since the general elections in October 2001, Bangladesh has been ruled by a coalition government, which for the first time includes two Ministers from the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI). JeI is now the third largest party in the country with 17 seats in the 300 member-strong Parliament. The four-party alliance that won the elections is led by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and, apart from the JeI, also includes a smaller Islamist party, the Islami Olkya Jote (IOJ), whose chairman, Azizul Huq, is a member of the advisory council of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), Bangladesh's main terrorist group. The IOJ captured two seats in Parliament, but was given no ministerial posts. The fourth member of the alliance, a faction of the Jatiya Party led by Naziur Rahman Manjoor, has no obvious Islamic profile.³

The BNP rode on a wave of dissatisfaction with the Awami League, which many perceived as corrupt, but the four-party alliance was able to win a massive majority – 191 seats for the BNP and 23 seats for its three allies – only because of the British-style system with one winner per constituency, and the alliance members all voted for each other. The Awami League remains the single largest political party in Bangladesh with 40 per cent of the popular vote, but it secured only 62 seats (or 20.66 per cent of the Members of Parliament IMPs) in the election (it now has 58 seats because four were relinquished due to the election of MPs from more than one seat).⁴ The ruling BNP and its alliance partners got 199 seats.⁵

Expectations were high on the new government, which many hoped would be “cleaner” than the previous one. In June 2001, the Berlin-based organisation, Transparency International, had in its annual report, ranked Bangladesh the world's most corrupt country.⁶ But since the new government took over last year, very little has changed in that regard. Further, violence has become widespread and much of it appears to be religiously and politically motivated. The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), a well-respected Bangladeshi NGO, quotes a local report which says that non-Muslim minorities have suffered as a result: “The intimidation of the minorities which had begun before the election, became worse afterwards.”⁷ Amnesty International reported in December 2001 that Hindus – who now make up less than 10 per cent of Bangladesh's population of 130 million – in particular have come under attack. Hindu places of worship have been ransacked, villages destroyed and scores of Hindu women are reported to have been raped.⁸

While the Jamaat may not be directly behind these attacks, its inclusion in the government has meant that more radical groups feel they now enjoy protection from the authorities and can act with impunity. The HuJI, for example, is reported to have 15,000 members of whom 2,000 are described as hard core. Bangladeshi Hindus and moderate Muslims hold them responsible for many of the recent attacks against religious minorities, secular intellectuals and journalists. In a statement released by the US State Department on May 21, 2002, HuJI is described as a terrorist organisation with ties to Islamic militants in Pakistan.⁹

While Bangladesh is yet far from becoming another Pakistan, Islamist forces are no doubt on the rise, and extremist influence is growing, especially in the countryside. According to a foreign

diplomat in Dhaka, “In the 1960s and 1970s, it was the leftists who were seen as incorruptible purists. Today, the role model for many young men in rural areas is the dedicated Islamic cleric with his skull cap, flowing robes and beard.”¹⁰

From Bengali to Islamist Nationalism

When East Pakistan seceded from the main Western part of the country to form Bangladesh in 1971, it was in opposition to the notion that all Muslim areas of former British India should unite in one state. The Awami League, which led the struggle for independence, grew out of the Bangla language movement, and was based on Bengali nationalism, not religion. At the same time, an independent and secular Bangladesh became the only country in the subcontinent with one dominant language group and very few ethnic and religious minorities. It is, however, important to remember that a dominant Muslim element has always been present; otherwise what was East Pakistan could have merged with the predominantly Hindu Indian State of West Bengal, where the same language is spoken.

The importance of Islam grew as the Awami League fell out with the country’s powerful military, which began to use religion as a counterweight to the League’s secular, vaguely socialist policies (many hard-line socialists, however, were opposed to the idea of a separate Bengali state in Bangladesh, which they branded as ‘bourgeois nationalism’). The late Bangladeshi scholar, Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, argued that Maj. Gen. Zia-ur-Rahman, who seized power in the mid-1970s, “successfully changed the image of Bangladesh from a liberal Muslim country to an Islamic country.”¹¹ Kabir also points out that ‘secularism’ is a hazy and often misunderstood concept in Bangladesh. The Bengali term for it is *dharina nirapekshata*, which literally translates to “religious neutrality.” Thus the word “secularism” in a Bangladeshi context has a subtle difference in meaning from its use in the West.’

In 1977, Zia dropped secularism as one of the four cornerstones of Bangladesh’s Constitution (the other three were democracy, nationalism, and socialism, although no socialist economic system was ever introduced) and made the recitation of verses from the Holy Koran a regular practice at meetings of his newly-formed political organisation, the BNP, which became the second biggest party in the country after the Awami League. The marriage of convenience between the military – which needed popular appeal and an ideological platform to justify its opposition to the Awami League – and the country’s Islamist forces, survived Zia’s assassination in 1981.

In some respects, it grew even stronger under the rule of Lt.Gen. Hossain Muhammad Ershad (1982-90). In 1988, Ershad made Islam the state religion of Bangladesh, thus institutionalizing the new brand of Islam-oriented nationalism introduced by Zia. Ershad also changed the weekly holiday from Sunday to Friday, and revived the Jamaat to counter secular opposition. The Jamaat had supported Pakistan against the Bengali nationalists during the liberation war, and most of its leaders had fled to (West) Pakistan after 1971. Under Zia, they returned and brought with them, new fundamentalist ideas. It was under Ershad that Islam became a political factor to be reckoned with.

Ershad was deposed in December 1990 following antigovernment protests, and was later convicted of a number of offences and jailed. However, this did not lead to a return to the old secular practices. Zia’s widow and the new leader of the BNP, Khaleda Zia, became Prime Minister after a general election in February 1991. This was a time when the Islamist forces further consolidated their influence in Bangladesh, but the process came to a halt when the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the daughter of Bangladesh’s founding father, Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, won the 1996 election.

Since last year’s election, however, extremist Islamist groups have once again become more blatant in their attacks on the country’s minorities and secular forces. The HuJI especially has attracted the attention of security planners in the region. The group was formed in 1992 reportedly with funds from Osama bin Laden.¹³ The existence of firm links between the new Bangladeshi militants and the Al Qaeda were first proven when Fazlur Rahman, leader of the “Jihad Movement in Bangladesh” (to which HuJI belongs), signed the official declaration of ‘holy war’ against the United States on February 23, 1998. Other signatories included bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri (chief of the Jihad Group in Egypt), Rifa’i Ahmad Taha aka Abu-Yasir (Egyptian Islamic Group), and Sheikh Mir Hamzah (secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan).¹⁴

HuJI is headed by Shawkat Osman alias Sheikh Farid in Chittagong and, according to the US State Department, has “at least six camps” in Bangladesh.¹⁵ According to an eyewitness in Ukhia, a small town south of Cox’s Bazaar, hundreds of armed men are staying in one of these camps near

the Burmese border. While some of them speak Bengali, the vast majority appears to be Arabs and others of Central and West Asian origin. The militants have warned villagers in the area that they would be killed if they informed the media or raised the issue with the authorities.¹⁶

Bangladesh's Islamist radicals first gained international attention in 1993, when author Taslima Nasreen was forced to flee the country after receiving death threats. The fundamentalists objected to her critical writings about what she termed outdated religious beliefs. Extremist groups offered a \$5,000 reward for her death. She now lives in exile in France.

While Nasreen's outspoken feminist writings caused controversy even among moderate Bangladeshi Muslims, the entire state was shocked when, in early 1999, three men attempted to kill Shamsur Rahman, a well-known poet and a symbol of Bangladesh's secular nationhood.¹⁷ During the ensuing arrests, the police said they seized a list of several intellectuals and writers, including Nasreen, whom Bangladeshi religious extremists branded "enemies of Islam."¹⁸

Bangladeshi human rights organisations openly accuse HuJI of being behind both the death threats against Nasreen and the attempt to kill Rahman. The US State Department notes that HuJI has been accused of stabbing a senior Bangladeshi journalist in November 2000 for making a documentary on the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh, and the July 2000 assassination attempt on the then Premier Sheikh Hasina.¹⁹

As with the Jamaat and its militant youth organisation, the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), HuJI's main stronghold is in the lawless southeast, which includes the border with Burma. With its fluid population and weak law enforcement, the region has for long been a haven for smugglers, gun-runners, pirates, and ethnic insurgents from across Burma's border. The past decade has seen a massive influx of weapons, especially small arms, through the fishing port of Cox's Bazaar, which has made the situation in the southeast even more dangerous and volatile.²⁰

Typically, the winner in the 2001 election in one of the constituencies in Cox's Bazaar, BNP candidate Shahjahan Chowdhury, was said to be supported by "the man allegedly leading smuggling operations in [the border town of] Teknaf."²¹ Instead of the regular army, the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) was deployed in this constituency to help the police in their electoral peacekeeping. This was, according to the SEHD, "criticised by the local people who alleged that the Bangladesh Rifles were well connected with the smuggling activities and thus could take partisan roles."²²

In one of the most recent high-profile attacks in the area, Gopal Krishna Muhuri, the 60-year-old principal of Nazirhat College in Chittagong and a leading secular humanist, was killed in November 2001 in his home by four hired assassins, who belonged to a gang patronized by the Jamaat.²³ India, which is viewing the growth of Bangladesh's Islamist movements with deep concern, has linked HuJI to the attack on the American Center in Kolkata (Calcutta) in January 2002, and a series of bomb blasts in the Northeastern State of Assam in mid-1999.²⁴

In early May 2002, nine Islamist fundamentalist groups, including HuJI, met at a camp near the small town of Ukhia south of Cox's Bazaar and formed the Bangladesh Islamic Manch (Association). The new umbrella organisation also includes one purporting to represent the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority in Burma, and the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), a small group operating in India's northeast. By June, Bangladeshi veterans of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s were reported to be training members of the new alliance in at least two camps in southern Bangladesh.²⁵

The Plight of the Rohingyas

The Arakan area of Burma was separated from the rest of the country by a densely forested mountain range, which made it possible for the Arakanese – most of whom are Buddhist – to maintain their independence until the late 18th century. Contacts with the outside world had, until then, been mostly to the west, which, in turn, had brought Islam to the region. The first Muslims on the Arakan coast were Moorish, Arab and Persian traders who arrived between the 9th and the 15th centuries. Some of them stayed and married local women. Their offspring became the forefathers of yet another hybrid race, which was, much later, to become known as the Rohingyas. Like the people in the Chittagong area, they speak a Bengali dialect interspersed with words borrowed from Persian, Urdu and Arakanese.²⁶

There is no evidence of friction between them and their Buddhist neighbours in the earlier days. Indeed, after 1430, the Arakanese kings, though Buddhists, even used Muslim titles in addition to their own names and issued medallions bearing the Muslim confession of faith.²⁷ Persian was the

court language until the Burmese invasion in 1784. Burmese rule lasted until the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26, when Arakan was taken over by the British along with the Tenasserim region of southeastern Burma.

When Burma was a part of British India, the rich rice lands of Arakan attracted thousands of seasonal labourers, especially from the Chittagong area of adjacent East Bengal. Many of them found it convenient to stay, since there was already a large Muslim population who spoke the same language, and, at that time, no ill feeling towards immigrants from India proper – unlike the situation in other parts of Burma, where people of sub-continental origin were despised. At the same time, Buddhist Arakanese migrated to East Bengal and settled along the coast between Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar. The official border, the Naf River, united rather than separated the two British territories.

But the presence of a Muslim minority in Arakan became an issue after Burma's independence in 1948. The Buddhist and Muslim communities had become divided during World War Two; the Buddhists had rallied behind the Japanese while the Muslims had remained loyal to the British. Some Muslims, fearing reprisals from the Buddhists once the British were gone, rose up in arms, demanding an independent state, and the Burmese army was sent in to quell the rebellion. Predominantly Buddhist Burma never really recognized the Arakanese Muslims – who in the 1960s began to refer to themselves as 'Rohingya,' a term of disputed origin – as one of the country's 'indigenous' ethnic groups. As such, and because of their different religion and physical appearance, they have often become convenient scapegoats for Burma's military government to rally the public against, whenever the country has been hit by economic or political crisis.

In March 1978, the Burmese government launched a campaign code-named *Naga Min* (Dragon King) in Arakan, ostensibly to 'check illegal immigrants.' Hundreds of heavily armed troops raided Muslim neighbourhoods in Sittwe (Akyab) and some 5,000 people were arrested. As the operation was extended to other parts of Arakan, tens of thousands of Rohingyas crossed the border to Bangladesh. By the end of June, approximately 200,000 Rohingyas had fled, causing an international outcry.²⁸ Eventually, most of the refugees were allowed to return, but thousands found it safer to remain on the Bangladesh side of the border. Entire communities of 'illegal immigrants' from Burma sprung up along the border south of Cox's Bazaar, and a steady trickle of refugees from Burma continued to cross into Bangladesh throughout the 1980s.

The immensely wealthy Saudi Arabian charity Rabitat al Alam al Islami began sending aid to the Rohingya refugees during the 1978 crisis, and it also built a hospital and a *madrassa* (seminary) at Ukhia south of Cox's Bazaar. Prior to these events, there was only one political organisation among the Rohingyas on the Bangladesh-Burma border, the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), which was set up in 1974 by Muhammad Jafar Habib, a native of Buthidaung in Arakan and a graduate of Rangoon University. He made several appeals – most of them unsuccessful – to the international Islamic community for help, and maintained a camp for his small guerrilla army, which operated from the Bangladeshi side of the border.

In the early 1980s, more radical elements among the Rohingyas broke away from the RPF to set up the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). Led by a medical doctor from Arakan, Muhammad Yunus, it soon became the main and most militant faction among the Rohingyas in Bangladesh and on the border. Given its more rigid religious stand, the RSO soon enjoyed Support from like-minded groups in the Muslim world.

These included JeI in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami (HeI) in Afghanistan, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the Angkatan Belia Islam sa-Malaysia (ABIM), and the Islamic Youth Organisation of Malaysia. Afghan instructors were seen in some of the RSO camps along the Bangladesh-Burma border, while nearly 100 RSO rebels were reported to be undergoing training in the Afghan province of Khost with Hizb-e-Islami Mujahideen.²⁹

The RSO's main military camp was located near the hospital that the Rabitat had built at Ukhia. At the time, the RSO acquired a substantial number of Chinese-made RPG-2 rocket launchers, light machine-guns, AK-47 assault rifles, claymore mines and explosives from private arms dealers in the Thai town of Aranyaprathet near Thailand's border with Cambodia, which in the 1980s emerged as a major arms bazaar for guerrilla movements in the region. These weapons were siphoned off from Chinese arms shipments to the resistance battling the Vietnamese army in Cambodia, and sold to any one who wanted, and could afford, to buy them.³⁰

The Bangladeshi media gave quite extensive coverage to the RSO build-up along the border, but

it soon became clear that it was not only Rohingyas who underwent training in its camps. Many, it turned out, were members of the ICS and came from the University of Chittagong, where a 'campus war' was being fought between Islamist militants and the more moderate student groups.³¹ The RSO was, in fact, engaged in little or no fighting inside Burma. Videotapes from these camps later showed up in Afghanistan, where they were obtained by the American cable TV network CNN and shown worldwide in August 2002. But as the tapes were marked 'Burma' in Arabic, it was assumed that they were shot inside the country instead of across the border in southeastern Bangladesh.³²

There was also a more moderate faction among the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), which was set up in 1986, uniting the remnants of the old RPF and a handful of defectors from the RSO. It was led by Nurul Islam, a Rangoon-educated lawyer. However, it never had more than a few dozen soldiers, mostly equipped with elderly, UK-made 9mm Sterling L2A3 sub-machine guns, bolt action .303 rifles and a few M-16 assault rifles.³³ In 1998, it became the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), maintaining its moderate stance and barely surviving in exile in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar.

The expansion of the RSO in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the unprecedented publicity the group attracted in the local and international media, prompted the Burmese government to launch a massive counter-offensive to 'clear up' the border area. In December 1991, Burmese troops crossed the border and attacked a Bangladeshi military outpost. The incident developed into a major crisis in Bangladesh-Burma relations, and by April 1992, more than 250,000 Rohingya civilians had been forced out of Arakan.

Hardly by coincidence, this second massive exodus of Rohingyas occurred at a time when Burma was engulfed in a major political crisis. The pro-democracy National League for Democracy (NLD) had won a landslide victory in a general election in May 1990, but the country's military regime refused to convene the elected assembly. There were anti-government demonstrations in the northern city of Mandalay and the ruling Burmese junta was condemned internationally.

The Rohingya refugees were housed in a string of makeshift camps south of Cox's Bazaar, prompting the Bangladeshi government to appeal for help from the international community. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) came in to run the camps and to negotiate with the Burmese government for the return of the Rohingyas. In April 1992, Prince Khaled Sultan Abdul Aziz, commander of the Saudi contingent in the 1991 Gulf War, visited Dhaka and recommended a Desert Storm-like action against Burma, "just what [the UN] did to liberate Kuwait."³⁴

That, of course, never did happen, and the Burmese government, under pressure from the United Nations (UN), eventually agreed to take most of the refugees back. But, an estimated 20,000 destitute refugees remain in two camps between Cox's Bazaar and the border. In addition, an undisclosed number of Rohingyas, perhaps as many as 100,000-150,000, continue to live outside the UNHCR-supervised camps. There is little doubt that extremist groups have taken advantage of the disenfranchised Rohingyas, including recruiting them as cannon fodder for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In an interview with the Karachi-based newspaper, *Ummat*, on September 28, 2001, bin Laden said: "There are areas in all parts of the world where strong *jihadi* forces are present, from Bosnia to Sudan, and from Burma to Kashmir."³⁵ He was most probably referring to a small group of Rohingyas on the Bangladesh-Burma border.

Many of the Rohingya recruits were given the most dangerous tasks in the battlefield, clearing mines and portering. According to Asian intelligence sources, Rohingya recruits were paid 30,000 Bangladeshi taka (\$525) on joining and then 10,000 taka (\$175) per month. The families of recruits killed in action were offered 100,000 taka (\$1,750).³⁶ Recruits were taken mostly via Nepal to Pakistan, where they were trained and sent on further to military camps in Afghanistan. It is not known how many people from this part of Bangladesh – Rohingyas and others – fought in Afghanistan, but the number is believed to be quite substantial. Others went to Kashmir and even Chechnya to join forces with Islamist militants there.³⁷

In an interview with the CNN in December 2001, American 'Taliban' fighter, John Walker Lindh, related that the Al Qaeda-directed *ansar* (companions of the Prophet) brigades, to which he had belonged in Afghanistan, were divided along linguistic lines: "Bengali, Pakistani (Urdu) and Arabic," which suggests that the Bengali-speaking component – Bangladeshi and Rohingya must have been significant.³⁸ In early 2002, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Dr. Abdullah, told a Western journalist that "we have captured one Malaysian and one or two supporters from Burma."³⁹

In January 2001, Bangladesh clamped down on Rohingya activists and offices in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar, most probably in an attempt to improve relations with Burma. Hundreds were rounded up, and the local press was full of reports of their alleged involvement in gunrunning and narcotics smuggling. Rohingya leaders vehemently deny such accusations and blame local Bangladeshi gangs with high-level connections for the violence in the area. However, the Rohingyas were forced to evacuate their military camps, which had always been located on the Bangladesh side of the border. It is these camps, which have been taken over by the HuJI and other Bangladeshi Islamist groups, with the main base being the one the RSO used to maintain near the Rabitat-built hospital in Ukhia, and where the CNN tape was shot in the early 1990s.⁴⁰

Rise of the Jamaat and Role of the Madrassas

The Jamaat was founded in 1941 in undivided India by Maulana Abul Ala Maududdi and had grown out of the Darul Uloom, the then most prestigious Islamic university in the Subcontinent. It was located at Deoband in the Saharanpur district of what is now Uttar Pradesh, and thus became known as the Deoband Madrassa (seminary). The Deobandis had actually arisen in British India, not as a reactionary force, but as a forward-looking movement to unite and reform Muslim society in the wake of oppression the community faced after the 1857 revolt, or 'Mutiny' as the British called it.⁴¹ But in independent Pakistan – East and West – new Deobandi madrassas were set up everywhere, and they were run by semi-educated mullahs who, according to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, "were far removed from the original reformist agenda of the Deobandi school."⁴² Over the years, the Deobandi brand of Islam has become synonymous with religious extremism and fanaticism and it was from these madrassas that Afghanistan's dreaded Taliban ('Islamic Students') emerged in the early and mid-1990s.

The Jamaat was, from the beginning, inspired by the Ikhwan ul-Muslimeen or the Muslim Brotherhood, which was set up in Egypt in 1928 with the aim of bringing about an Islamic revolution and creating an Islamic state.⁴³ When they had come to accept Pakistan as that Islamic state, Bengali nationalism became totally unacceptable. The Jamaat's militants fought alongside the Pakistan army against the Bengali nationalists. Among the most notorious of the Jamaat leaders was Abdul Kader Molla, who became known as 'the Butcher of Mirpur', a Dhaka suburb that in 1971 was populated mainly by non-Bengali Muslim immigrants.⁴⁴ Today, he is the publicity secretary of the Bangladeshi Jamaat and, despite his background, was granted a US visa to visit New York in the last week of June 2002. In 1971, he and other Jamaat leaders were considered war criminals by the first government of independent Bangladesh, but they were never prosecuted as they had fled to Pakistan.

The leaders of the Jamaat returned to Bangladesh during the Zia and Ershad regimes because they were invited to come back, and they also saw Ershad especially as a champion of their cause. This was somewhat ironic as Ershad was – and still is – known as a playboy and hardly a religiously minded person. But he had introduced a string of Islamic reforms – and he needed the Jamaat to counter the Awami League, and like his predecessor Zia, he had to find ideological underpinnings for what was basically a military dictatorship. The problem was that the Jamaat had been discredited by its role in the liberation war. However, as a new generation emerged, that could be 'corrected' as the Jamaat's Islamic ideals were once again taught in Bangladesh's *madrassas*, which multiplied at a tremendous pace.

The *madrassas* fill an important function in an impoverished country such as Bangladesh, where basic education is available only to a few. Today, there are an estimated 64,000 *madrassas* in Bangladesh, divided into two kinds. The Aliya *madrassas* are run with government support and control, while the Dars-e-Nizami or Deoband-style *madrassas* are totally independent. Aliya students study for 15-16 years and are taught Arabic, religious theory and other Islamic subjects as well as English, mathematics, science and history. They prepare themselves for employment in government service, or for jobs in the private sector like any other college or university student. In 1999, there were 7,122 such registered *madrassas* in Bangladesh.⁴⁵

The much more numerous Deobandi *madrassas* are more 'traditional'; Islamic studies dominate, and the students are taught Urdu (the national language of Pakistan), Persian and Arabic. After finishing their education, the students are incapable of taking up any mainstream profession, and the mosques and *madrassas* are their main sources of employment. As Bangladeshi journalist Salahuddin Babar points out: "Passing out from the *madrassas*, poorly equipped to enter mainstream life and professions, the students are easily lured by motivated quarters who capitalise on religious sentiment to create fanatics, rather than modern Muslims."⁴⁶

The consequences of this kind of *madrassa* education can be seen in the growth of the Jamaat. It did not fare well in the 1996 election, capturing only three seats in the parliament and 8.61 per cent of the votes.⁴⁷ Its election manifesto was also quite carefully worded, perhaps taking into consideration the party's reputation and the fact that the vast majority of Bangladeshis remain opposed to Sharia law and other extreme Islamic practices. The 23-page document devoted 18 pages to lofty election promises, and only five to explaining Jamaat's Political stand. The party tried to reassure the public that it would not advocate chopping off thieves' hands, stoning of people guilty of committing adultery, or banning interest – at least not immediately. According to the SEHD, "The priority focus would be alleviation of poverty, stopping free mixing of sexes and thus awakening the people to the spirit of Islam and then eventually step by step the Islamic laws would be introduced."⁴⁸

But in October 2001, the Jamaat emerged as the third largest party in the country and its militant youth organisation, the ICS, became especially bold and active. Like the HuJI, the ICS also draws most of its members from the country's many Deobandi *madrassas* and it also has its own network of international contacts. The ICS is a member of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations as well as the World

Assembly of Muslim Youth and has close contacts with other radical Muslim groups in Pakistan, the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia. At home in Bangladesh, it has been implicated in a number of bombings and politically as well as religiously motivated assassinations.

On April 7, 2001, two leaders of the Awami League's youth and student front were killed by ICS activists and on June 15, 2001, an estimated 21 persons were killed and over 100 injured in a bomb blast at the Awami League party office in the town of Narayanganj. Two weeks later, the police arrested an ICS activist for his alleged involvement in the blast.⁴⁹ A young Islamist militant, Nurul Islam Bulbul, is the ICS's current president, and Muhammad Nazrul Islam its general secretary.

For many years, the mother party, the Jamaat, was led by Gholam Azam, who had returned from Pakistan when Zia was still alive and in power. He resigned in December 2000, and Motiur Rahman Nizami took over as the new chief of the party amid wide protests and demands that he be put on trial for war crimes he committed during the liberation war as the head of a notorious paramilitary force, the Al-Badar. In one particular incident on December 3, 1971, some members of that force seized the village of Bishalikkha at night in search of freedom fighters, beating many and killing eight people. When Nizami's appointment was made public, veterans of the liberation war burnt an effigy of him during a public rally.⁵⁰ In October 2001, Nizami was appointed Minister for Agriculture, an important post in a mainly agricultural country such as Bangladesh. His deputy, Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mujahid, became Minister for Social Welfare.

The terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001 occurred during the election campaign in Bangladesh, when a caretaker government ruled the country. But, the outgoing Prime Minister, the Awami League's Sheikh Hasina, and then opposition leader Khaleda Zia of the BNP, condemned the attacks and both, if they were elected, offered the United States use of Bangladesh's air space, ports and other facilities to launch military attacks against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Many Bangladeshis were moved by the loss of as many as 50 of their countrymen in the attacks on the World Trade Center. While some of them were immigrants working as computer analysts and engineers, most seem to have been waiters at the Window on the World restaurant who were working hard to send money back to poor relatives in Bangladesh. A Bangladeshi embassy official in Washington branded the attacks "an affront to Islam ... an attack on humanity."⁵¹

Jamaat's stand on the 'war against terrorism' however contrasts sharply with that of the more established parties. Shortly after the US attacks on Afghanistan began in October 2001, the Jamaat created a fund purportedly for "helping the innocent victims of America's war." According to the Jamaat's own announcements, 12 million taka (\$210,000) was raised before the effort was discontinued in March 2002. Any remaining funds, them Jamaat then said, would go to Afghan refugees in camps in Pakistan.⁵²

Links to Central and West Asia

On the night of December 21, 2001 – only a few weeks after the fall of the Taliban-stronghold of Kandahar – a ship, the *m.v. Mecca*, arrived in Chittagong port. Onboard were several hundred Taliban and Al Qaeda cadres along with arms and ammunition. Under the cover of darkness, they boarded buses and lorries and were driven down to the southeastern border areas.⁵³

It was supposed to have been a secret operation, but news about it gradually leaked out through local NGOs. Further, on September 23, 2002, seven 'foreign aid workers' were arrested in Dhaka. The Dhaka police initially said that the men, who were from Libya, Algeria, Sudan and Yemen, were arrested on suspicion of trafficking in children. All of them worked for a Saudi-funded voluntary agency, the Al Haramain Islamic Institute (AHII), which first came to Bangladesh in 1992 to work among the Rohingya refugees in the southeast. Before long, the Institute became active all over Bangladesh, running three orphanages and 60 *madrassas* in various parts of the country.⁵⁴

Dhaka residents familiar with the arrest of the seven men claimed that students at their facilities were also undergoing military training. Western intelligence sources believe that the seven were among the group that slipped into Bangladesh onboard the *m.v. Mecca*, and that they later linked up with the AHII in the area before moving their operations to Dhaka.⁵⁵ The authorities were quick to deny any such links, and it is still unclear whether their arrest was a mistake made by overzealous Police officers in Dhaka, for the arrival of the *m.v. Mecca* was no doubt the outcome of an arrangement between Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and its Bangladeshi counterpart, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). Following the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York in September 2001, Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, took the controversial step of siding with the US and even allowed his country to be used as a staging point in the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. This was a complete turn-around on Pakistan's part as the ISI in the mid-1990s had been instrumental in creating the Taliban movement, and also had extensive contacts with Al Qaeda. Musharraf had to clean up the ISI, but could only do so gradually. While this was in process, hundreds, if not thousands, of Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives came fleeing to Pakistan. This was a major embarrassment, and it is now clear that the ISI contacted the DGFI and had at least some of the now unwanted guests sent away to Bangladesh.⁵⁶

Whether this was for 'safe-keeping' purposes is debatable, but even so it reflects the close ties that exist between the security services of Pakistan and Bangladesh – and even more so the growing links between Bangladesh's Islamist militants and various extremist outfits in Central and West Asia. Even if we accept the 'safe-keeping' argument, it is nevertheless unlikely that the militants will be content with keeping a low profile in their new homeland. They are, after all, at war with the West and other 'infidels', and there are plenty of opportunities for new actions in the area where they now are. The ties with the Rohingyas could spell problems for Burma, and the presence in Bangladesh of several insurgent groups from India's northeast could mean more terrorist attacks in Indian States such as Assam. Both the Rohingyas and the MULTA were present at the meeting in Ukhia in May 2002, when the Bangladesh Islamic Manch was formed – and so were militants of non-sub continental origin. A 'Jihad Council' was formed to coordinate the activities of the nine member-organisations.

All these groups may be small and seemingly insignificant in the broader context of Bangladeshi politics, and despite increased Islamisation over the past decade, the country's secular roots are holding, at least for the time being. However the country's Islamist militants are becoming more vocal and daring in their attacks on 'infidels', a worrying sign in what still is basically a very tolerant society. And it is not the number of extremists that matters – even a small group can spread fear and terror – but how well organised and dedicated they are.

The arrival of experienced militants from Central and West Asia is especially worrying, as is the proliferation of small arms in Bangladesh, especially in the Chittagong-Cox's Bazaar area. The fact that millions of young Bangladeshis now graduate from *madrassas* run by fanatics is also bound to change perceptions of life and society – and attitudes towards 'infidels' in general. As Indonesia – another country that until recently was considered a moderate Muslim state – has shown, an economic collapse or political crisis can give rise to militants for whom religious fanaticism equals national pride; and a way out of misrule, disorder and corrupt worldly politics. There is every reason to watch developments in Bangladesh carefully, especially as its government remains vehemently in a state of denial – which means that it is not going to do anything to stop the spread of extremism and fanaticism.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See for instance Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Hong Kong, April 4, 2002, pp. 14-17; Alex Perry, "Deadly Cargo", *Time*, Hong Kong, vol. 160, no. 15, October 21, 2002.
- 2 A government spokesperson described as a "figment of the imagination" a report that quoted *Time* as reporting that the country's intelligence agents "have been maintaining contact with their counterparts in Pakistan's InterServices Intelligence (ISI)" and that Bangladesh was a "hotbed of anti-India terrorists". The Foreign Ministry said the report was aimed at harming the "friendly and smooth relations between India and Bangladesh". The government "vehemently and categorically denies the contents of the report", said the spokesperson, adding that "it is perhaps contrived and motivated with a view to serving the interest of certain vested quarters". See "Report and reality", *Frontline*, Chennai, vol. 19 no. 23, November 9-22, 2002.
- 3 For a list of Islamist groups in Bangladesh, see Appendix 1. For a list of office bearers and branches of the HuJI, see Appendix 2.
- 4 The Eighth Parliamentary Elections 2001, Dhaka: Society for Environment and Human Development for Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh, March 2002, p. 2.
- 5 See "Results Summary", www.bd-ec.org/election.php3?sum=1
- 6 <http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2001/cpi2001.html>.
- 7 The Eighth Parliamentary Elections 2001, p. 161.
- 8 Bangladesh: Attacks on Members of the Hindu Minority, London: Amnesty International, December 2001.
- 9 See *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, May 21, 2002. See <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2001/html/10254.htm#hujib>.
- 10 Bertil Lintner, "Is religious extremism on the rise in Bangladesh?", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, London, May 2002.
- 11 Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism: The Case of Bangladesh*, Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1994, p. 201.
- 12 *Ibid*, p. 189.
- 13 See South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; Bangladesh; Terrorist Groups; HuJI; www.satp.org.
- 14 See Emergency Response and Research Institute (ERRI) Daily Intelligence Report, ERRI Risk Assessment Service, June 11, 1998, vol. 4-162. The full text of the 1998 fatwah is also available on <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>.
- 15 *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*.
- 16 E-mail from an NGO activist in the area who insisted on anonymity, September 25, 2002.
- 17 An attempt on the life of Rahman was made on January 18, 1999. After Police arrested 10 HuJI activists and sealed its office in the Dhaka suburb of Khilgaon, interrogations revealed that they planned to kill 28 prominent intellectuals including National Professor Kabir Choudhury, writer Taslima Nasreen and the Director General of the Islamic Foundation, Maulana Abdul Awal. See South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; Bangladesh; Assessment 18 2000; www.satp.org.
- 18 Türkaya Ataöv, *Kashmir and Neighbours: Tale, Terror, Truce*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001, p. 150.
- 19 *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2001*.
- 20 *Small Arms Survey 2001: Profiling the Problem*, Oxford: Oxford University Press and Small Arms Survey, Geneva, 2001 p. 181.
- 21 The Eighth Parliamentary Elections 2001, p. 99.
- 22 *Ibid*.
- 23 Amnesty International, December 2001.
- 24 *The Hindu*, Chennai, January 23, 2002. Also see Subir Bhaumik, "The Second Front of Islamic Terror in South Asia", paper presented at an international seminar on terrorism and low intensity conflict, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, March 6-8, 2002.
- 25 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Hong Kong, July 11, 2002.
- 26 For a comprehensive account of the Rohingyas and other Muslim communities in Burma, see Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972.

- 27 Ibid p. 19.
- 28 For an account of the 1978 refugee crisis, see Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, Chiang Mal: Silkworm Books, 1999, pp. 317-8.
- 29 Bertil Lintner, "Tension Mounts in Arakan State," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 19, 1991. The story was based on interview with Rohingyas and others in the Cox's Bazaar area in 1991. I also visited a Rohingya army camp near the border with Burma.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Interviews and observations made when I visited the border in 1991.
- 32 See "Bangladesh: Championing Islamist Extremism", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, vol. 1, no. 9, September 16, 2002; *South Asia Terrorism Portal*; www.satp.org/satpor/tp/sair/Archives/I_9.htm.
- 33 *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 19, 1991.
- 34 For an account of the 1991-92 Rohingya refugee crisis, see Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, pp. 397-8.
- 35 See also Jim Garamone, "Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda Network," *American Forces Press Service*, September 21, 2001: "Al-Qaeda has cells in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Jordan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Syria, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Dagestan, Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Uganda, Ethiopia, and in the West Bank and Gaza."
- 36 *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 2002.
- 37 Subir Bhaumik, "Second Front of Islamic Terror".
- 38 Transcript of John Walker interview, CNN, July 4, 2002, www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asi-apcf/centra/12/20/ret.walker.transcript/
- 39 Bertil Lintner, "A Recipe for Trouble," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 4, 2002. The comment was made to the editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Michael Vatikiotis.
- 40 I visited the area, including Ukhia, in March 2002.
- 41 For an excellent account of the rise of the Deobandis, see Salahuddin Babar, "Rise of the Right", *Probe Newsmagazine* (Bangladesh), March 1-15, 2002.
- 42 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords*, London: Pan Books, 2001, p. 89.
- 43 Ibid, p. 86.
- 44 Ahmed Salim, "Murders Most Foul," *Newsline*, Karachi, November 29, 2000.
- 45 *Probe*, March 1-15, 2002.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 *The Reporter's Guide: Handbook on Election Reporting*, Dhaka: Society for Environment and Human Development, 2001, p. 101.
- 48 Ibid, p. 101.
- 49 *Bangladesh Assessment 2002*, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*; www.satp.org
- 50 *Bangladesh Broadcasting Service*, Dhaka, December 8, 2000.
- 51 <http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/01100321.htm>
- 52 *Holiday*, Dhaka, March 8, 2002.
- 53 Alex Perry, "Deadly Cargo", *Time*, Asian edition, October 21, 2002.
- 54 "Dhaka Police Look for Al-Qaeda Link," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 10, 2002. 55 Ibid. Also see *Time*, October 21, 2002.
- 56 For a complete coverage of the operation, see *Time*, October 21, 2002.

APPENDIX I

Main Islamist Groups in Bangladesh

Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI)

The JeI is a political party that dates back to the British colonial era, and the (East) Pakistan period (1947-1971). It supported Pakistan against the Bengali nationalists during the liberation war, and most of its leaders fled to (West) Pakistan after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Its then amir (chief), Gholam Azam, fought against the freedom fighters in 1971, but returned to Bangladesh a few years later. In December 2000, Motiur Rahman Nizami, another former pro-Pakistani militant, took over as amir of the JeI. In the October 2001 election, the JeI emerged as the third largest party with 17 seats in Parliament and two ministers in the new coalition government. The Jamaat's final aim is an Islamic state in Bangladesh, although this will be implemented step by step.

Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS)

ICS is the youth wing of the JeI. Set up in 1941, it became a member of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations in 1979. The ICS is also a member of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth and has close contacts with other radical Muslim youth groups in Pakistan, the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia. One of its main strongholds in Bangladesh is at the university in Chittagong, and it dominates privately run madrassas all over the country. It has been involved in a number of bomb blasts and politically and religiously motivated assassinations. Nurul Islam Bulbul is its current president and Muhammed Nazrul Islam is the secretary general.

Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ)

A smaller Islamist party that joined the four-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which won the October 2001 election. The IOJ secured two seats in Parliament, but did not get any cabinet posts.

Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI)

The HuJI is Bangladesh's main militant organisation. Set up in 1992, it now has an estimated strength of 15,000 and is headed by Maulana Shawkat Osman alias Sheikh Farid in Chittagong. Its members are recruited mainly from students of the country's many madrassas, and until year 2001, they called themselves the 'Bangladeshi Taliban'. The group is believed to have extensive contacts with Muslim organisations in the Indian States of West Bengal and Assam. Azizul Huq, Chairman of the IOJ is a member of the HuJI's advisory council.

'The Jihad Movement'

Osama bin Laden's February 23, 1998, fatwah (religious ruling) urging Jihad against the United States was co-signed by two Egyptian clerics, one from Pakistan, and Fazlur Rahman, "leader of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh". This is not believed to be a separate organisation but a common name for several Islamist groups in Bangladesh, of which HuJI is considered the biggest and most important.

Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)

The ARNO is a political group among Rohingya migrants from Myanmar, who live in the Chittagong-Cox's Bazaar area, and claim to be fighting for an autonomous Muslim region in Burma's Arakan (Rakhine) State. It was set up in 1998 through a merger of the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). Within months, however, the front fell apart. The leader of what remains of ARNO, Nurul Islam, is considered a moderate. He also led the ARIF before the merger in 1998.

Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO)

Following the break-up of ARNO in 1999-2000, three new factions emerged, all of them re-claiming the old name RSO. Traditionally, the RSO has been very close to Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar. In the early 1990s, RSO had several military camps near the Burmese border, where cadres from the ICS were also trained in guerrilla warfare.

APPENDIX 2

Harkat-ul-Jihad-Al-Islami/Bangladesh

Central Executive Body

- a) Maulana Najrul Islam, Amir
- b) Mufti Maulana Safiur Rahman, Dy Amir
- c) Mufti Abdul Hye
- d) Mufti Manjurul Hossain
- e) Maulana Niamatullah Farid
- f) Maulana Baqi Billah
- g) Maulana Sayeed Abu Taher
- h) Maulana Samsuddin Kasimi
- i) Maulana Abu Nasir
- j) Maulana Fazlu Haq, Amini of Bangladesh Islamic Khelafat Andolan
- k) Maulana Aatur Rahman Khan, Ex-MP of Kishoreganj
- l) Abdul Zabbar of the Young Muslim League
- m) Maulana Mohiuddin of the Islamic Morcha

Advisory Council

- a) Maulana Mohiuddin Khan, Chief
- b) Mufti Abdul Hye, Dy Chief, arrested by Bangladesh police on November 8, 1998
- c) Maulana Manjur Ahmed, arrested by Bangladesh police on November 8, 1998
- d) Maulana Fazlul Karim, Peer of Charmonai, chief of the Islamic Shasantantra. Andolan
- e) Peer of Sharsina
- f) Peer of Fultali, Sylhet
- g) Mufti Shafi Ahmed, Hathazari madrassa, Chittagong
- h) Mufti Taherullah, Patiya madrassa, Chittagong
- i) Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad
- j) Maulana Karnaluddin Zafri
- k) Maulana Delawar Hossain Saidi
- l) Maulana Obaidullah
- m) Prof. Akhtar Farooq
- n) Maulana Saikul Haddis Allama
- o) Azizul Huq, Amir, Bangladesh Khilafat, Majlish and Chairman of the Islami Oikya Jote
- p) Mohd. Abdus Mannan, principal Gauhardanga madrassa, Gopalganj, secretary general of the Sarbodaya Olema Parishad

Khulna Branch

- a) Mohd. Sirajul Haque, Amir
- b) Mohd. Anisur Rahaman
- c) Mohd. Sattaruddin Khan
- d) Kasem Ali

Chittagong Branch

Office at Jameyat-ul-Ulurn madrassa, Lalkhanbazaar, Chittagong and Chief Maulavi is Maulana Azharul Islam

- a) Abdur Rouf, Amir
- b) Mufti Shaiqur Rahman, Dy Amir
- c) Abdul Baset
- d) Abdul Khaled
- e) Abu Tarek
- f) Abdul Hakim
- g) Amzad Belal
- h) Obaidur Rahman Khan
- i) Maulana Abdul Quddus
- j) Maulana Mahbulul Alam, patron, based at 73, Kusumbagh, Dhoberpahar, near Chittagong

Cox's Bazaar Branch

Maulana Salahul Islam, 36 yrs old, works for an NGO called AlHaramain (a Mecca-based organisation) in Cox's Bazaar. Graduated from of Riyadh University, reportedly close to the chief of the Karachi branch of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen.

Sylhet Branch

- a) Maulana Mohd. Abdul Karim, Patron, aka Sheikh-e-Kauria and president of the Sylhet branch of the Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, Sylhet
- b) Peer of Fultali, Fultali, Sylhet
- c) Juned Ahmed, Biyani Bazaar, Sylhet
- d) Abdul Matin, Biyani Bazaar, Sylhet

Jessore Branch

- a) Maulana Manirul Islam Madani, patron, Viana, Jessore Katwali PS
- b) Mufti Aminul Huq, imam of Railway Station madrassa, Jessore
- c) Maulana Abdul Hassan Muhaddis (BA from Calcutta University and FAREK [similar to an MA in religious studies] from Deoband madrassa, Sahranpur, UP, India. Presently employed as principal, Qaumi madrassa, Jessore. Gen. Scy. of the Jessore branch of the Nizami-e-Islami party in the East Pakistan era.
- d) Maulana Abdur Rouf, 50 yrs old, originally from Bongaon, West Bengal. Ex org. scy. of the Nizami-e-Islami party in the East Pakistan era. Arrested in 1971 for his anti-Liberation movement activities. Now a resident of Barandipara, Jessore.
- e) Mufti Aminul Islam
- f) Abdur Jabbar (retired DSP, Bangladesh Police)
- g) D.K. Baksh (retired subedar major, Bangladesh Army)

Brahmanbaria Branch

- a) Maulana Sirajul Islam, head, Zamia Yunnsia madrassa, Brahmanbaria
- b) Abdul Karim, leader of the Taliban Mujahids, trained in Afghanistan. There are 15 Bangladeshi Taliban Mujahids under his command, recruited from and based at Brahmanbaria

Comilla Branch

- a) Imam of Ibne Tahmina High School, patron, Comilla
- b) Mohd. Ali Akhtar, leader of Taliban Mujahids, Comilla. There are 15 Bangladeshi Taliban Mujahids under his command, recruited from and based at Comilla

Training establishments

1. Mohiursunnals madrassa. Knila, Teknaf, Cox's Bazaar (near the Burmese border)
2. Hathazara madrassa, Chittagong Sadar
3. Patiya madrassa, Patiya, Chittagong Sadar
4. Jalpaitali and Tetultali, Bandarban District, Chittagong Hill Tracts
5. Maheshkhali and Garzania Hills in Nykhongchari PS, Bandarban District, Chittagong Hill Tracts
6. Raniping, Kazir Bazaar and Munshi Bazaar madrassas in Fultali PS, Sylhet District.
7. Baluchhera, Cox's Bazaar District (main camp)
8. Jameyat-ul-Ulum madrassa, Lalkhanbazaar, Chittagong
9. Brahmanbaria
10. Nayapara, Damudia Union, Teknaf, Cox's Bazaar District
11. Narichha Bazaar, Chittagong District
12. Rangamati Islamic Complex madrassa, Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts
13. Mohmadpur Rahmiya Jamiatul madrassa, Dhaka
14. Lalmatia Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
15. Malibagh Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
16. Hajaripara Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
17. Madani Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
18. Farmgati Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
19. Gazipur Bormi Kaumi madrassa

Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh. January 2007. Authors

There is concern among observers that the secular underpinnings of moderate Bangladesh are being undermined by a culture of political violence and the rise of Islamist extremists. A further deterioration of Bangladesh's democracy and political stability may create additional space within which Islamist militants may be increasingly free to operate. Such a development may have destabilizing implications for Bangladesh, South Asia, and the Islamic world. They also have the potential to undermine U.S. interests. Bangladesh cannot afford to be seen as a haven for Islamist fanatics and terrorists. But, at the same time, it is undeniable that Bangladesh, over the past decade, has gone through a fundamental political and social transformation. A new brand of nationalism with an Islamist flavour is gradually replacing secular Bengali nationalism as the basis for Bangladesh's nationhood. While Bangladesh is yet far from becoming another Pakistan, Islamist forces are no doubt on the rise, and extremist influence is growing, especially in the countryside. According to a foreign diplomat in Dhaka, "In the 1960s and 1970s, it was the leftists who were seen as incorruptible purists. Seven Islamist extremists have been sentenced to death by a Bangladesh court over a savage 2016 attack that killed 22 people including 18 foreigners at a Dhaka cafe popular with Westerners. A special anti-terrorism tribunal delivered the verdict in a crowded courtroom in the capital Dhaka, with judge Mojibur Rahman saying the attackers wanted "to draw the attention of Islamic State" group. The brazen assault in July 2016 saw young men armed with assault rifles and machetes lay siege to the Holey Artisan Bakery cafe in Dhaka's well-heeled Gulshan neighbourhood. Police investigators said the attack was aimed at destabilising the Muslim majority nation of 168 million people and to turn it into an Islamist state. Bangladesh began to witness a surge in moderate, fundamental and extremist forms of political Islam with global and regional linkages. In doing so, Islamists use Bangladesh as just another imaginary battleground in their war against an imaginary West, associated in their eyes with capitalism, democracy and their institutions. This conflict waged by various Islamists may be interpreted as a form of resistance against the impact of an ongoing unfair economic globalization on Bangladesh. There is a strong possibility that the Islamists will become a formidable political force in Bangladesh in the next 20 years unless the BNP and the AL put an end to their schism. The outcome of the International Crimes Tribunal initiated by the AL will play an essential part.