

FUNDAMENTALIST TRENDS IN BANGLADESH: Is the World Losing a Moderate Muslim Democracy?

by Andrea Muraskin

“TERRORIST MENACE UBIQUITOUS, ALL-PERVASIVE AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL IN BANGLADESH,” screams the headline of an article published this summer in the Calcutta-based newspaper, *Statesman*. The author describes the reign of “criminal,” “revolutionary,” “Islamic” terrorists wreaking havoc on the country. In northern Bangladesh, regional newspapers published blank front pages for a week after a local editor was brutally axed to death—the fourth journalist killed in 2004, according to a report on OneWorld.net. This August, a bomb thrown into a meeting of the opposition party, the Awami League, killed 18 and injured 200. In the same month, anti-fundamentalist poet Humayan Azad died in Munich; his family believes it was an assassination. So, what’s behind the chaos?

Bangladesh, a Muslim democracy in South Asia, is deeply impoverished, with almost 50% of the population living below the national poverty line. It has a literacy rate of 43.1%. Arms and undocumented persons flow easily through its porous borders, and bribery is a part of everyday life. Transparency International, a Berlin-based global watchdog on corruption, has rated Bangladesh the world’s most corrupt coun-

try. An Islamist party has been part of the ruling coalition government since 2001, and several Islamic groups are active on the political scene. Conditions seem ripe for Bangladesh to be a new hotspot for the Islamist trend that has unnerved the West since 9/11. Is an Islamic fundamentalist government in Bangladesh inevitable?

A History of Tolerance

Journalist Moinuddin Naser, who has been living in New York since 1999, worked as a journalist in Bangladesh from 1978 to 1999 and is a former editor of the New York-based *Bangla Patrika*, a Bangla-language weekly. Sitting in the *Patrika's* office in



Image © CIA World Factbook

Political borders of Bangladesh.

Queens, Naser said he does not believe that Bangladesh is heading toward an Islamist government. He argued that history precludes such a thing from happening. Historically, the Muslims of East Bengal (Bangladesh) share a language and cultural and ethnic heritage with Hindu Bengalis in their midst and to their west in India. In 1948, British and Indian officials divided the Indian subcontinent based on religion. East Bengal, the area surrounding the delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, became

East Pakistan. For 23 years, East Bengalis shared a government with their fellow Muslims in what is now Pakistan, traversing barriers of language, culture, and 1100 miles of Indian territory.

After a divisive election and Bengali demands for autonomy, the two Pakistans fought a war in 1971. The result (thanks in part to an Indian intervention) was an independent Bangladesh. “Bangladesh was liberated on the basis of cultural differences,” Naser explained. “Bangladeshis believe in Bengali culture, and they do not like to be repressed by the more aggressive, religion-minded people of Pakistan.” Since then, Bangladesh has maintained its position as a secular Muslim democracy.

In recent years Islamic parties have entered into Bangladeshi mainstream politics—most notably the government coalition member Jamaat-e-Islami. A secularist himself, Naser described the Jamaat as a legitimate political party with no connection to Al Qaeda, nor to *jamaats* (Islamic parties) in Pakistan or India. Naser believes that Jamaat wants “to see Islamic rule through democratic means.”

Sayed Ur-Rabb concurs. Rabb came to New York as a student in 1989 and remained to become editor-in-chief of the *Weekly Thikana*, the first and most widely circulated Bangladeshi paper in the United States. According to Rabb, the Jamaat is losing popularity and seats in parliament despite forming a coalition with the ruling Bangladeshi National Party (BNP). “The Jamaat will never come to power,” he

explained, because “Bangladesh is a very moderate country.”

After listening to a list of acronyms of Islamic militant groups mentioned in an article in the *Statesman*, Monjur Hossain, advertising director of the *Thikana*, responded: “These groups do not exist in Bangladesh.” Rabb and Hossain believe that Indian propaganda is responsible for much of the alarmism surrounding Islamic militancy in Bangladesh. They have criticized India for promoting Hindu fundamentalism under the current government. “If you go to India, you will see a lot of fighting [between] Hindus and Muslims. They bomb the mosque,” Naser said. He was referring to the bombing of India’s Babri mosque in 1992, when Hindu fundamentalists, backed by the rising nationalist party, destroyed a mosque that they believed sat on top of Krishna’s birthplace. “But in Bangladesh you will never find that,” Rabb said. In Bangladesh some Muslims took to Dhaka’s streets, attacking Hindu establishments, but politicians swiftly condemned all religious violence, which never reached Indian proportions. It is a point of pride for Rabb, as for many Bangladeshis, that religious tolerance, and not religious fundamentalism, is held in high esteem in Bangladesh.

Even a non-Bangla reader can tell from scanning the pages of the *Thikana* or *Patrika* that Bangladeshis don’t resemble strict Islamists. Reappearing from week to week on the cover are the faces of Bangladesh’s dueling female leaders, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia of the ruling BNP, and Sheik Hasina of the left wing opposition Awami League, with their hair covered ceremoniously but not completely. Although both were selected by their parties thanks to the political legacy of a late male relative—Zia’s hus-

Bangladesh is rapidly becoming a conduit for extreme political and religious views.

band Ziaur Rahman and Hasina’s father Sheik Mujib each ruled Bangladesh at different times—the women possess the full political power of their positions.

Pointing to secular, criminal forces as the real problem in the country, Naser and Rabb criticized the government and the criminal way in which it has allowed the country to operate. “Bangladesh is infested by the thugs and goons of the secular forces,” Naser said angrily.

Rabb described these forces as “miscreants”—not terrorists. He explained that journalists are targeted specifically by the people they write against, and politicians are murdered by henchmen of the rival party—acts of targeted violence. Such crimes usually go un-prosecuted. Rabb’s brother M. M. Shaheen, who founded *Thikana* and has since returned to Bangladesh to become an independent minister in Parliament, received threats from the Finance Minister’s son for exposing an embezzlement scheme. Despite its promises, no government has, as yet, managed to establish an independent judiciary. Rabb sees this lack of judicial independence as the deepest systemic ill in Bangladesh.

Naser deplores the paralysis of Bangladesh’s “quasi- democracy,” where ministers belonging to one party or the other are constitutionally bound to vote along the

party line. “If she says ‘the sun sets in the East,’ you have to raise your hand,” explains Rabb, and instead of doing their jobs as civil servants, “everyone is trying to please these two ladies.” Rabb emphasized that to the impoverished masses, democracy means very little. Both Rabb and Naser see a pressing need for reformers in Bangladesh—people completely free from the corruption of the old parties.

Fertile Ground for Fundamentalists?

Arnold Zeitlin, an American journalist who has reported extensively on Bangladesh since 1969, holds a different view. Zeitlin writes from Dhaka, where he is working to record the experiences of the political figure and owner of the *Ittefaq* newspaper, Anwar Hossain Manju. “Because Bangladeshi borders are so porous, because enforcement of law and order is so poor, because the system is so corrupt, anyone can easily obtain a Bangladesh passport and fake visas,” Zeitlin notes. Consequently, “Bangladesh is rapidly becoming a conduit for extreme political and religious views.”

Zeitlin has written that the Jamaat-e-Islami party is “seeking power through democratic means in much the way Nazis in the early 1930s sought power through the ballot box” Naser had said that the Jamaat vote was 12% in 2001 and was the same in 1970, at the country’s first election. Zeitlin pointed out, however, that the Islamist party has been gaining influence through the popular vote. Though the BNP and the Awami League received roughly the same amount of votes, the BNP received 180 seats in a house of 300, with Jamaat endorsement of BNP candidates making up much of the difference.

Tareen Hossain, Manju’s daughter, who earned degrees in international affairs from George Washington and Georgetown Universities and now lives in Manhattan, explained that “A lot of the politicians in Bangladesh are [now] having to join hands with the mullahs.” Her grandfather Manik Mia was a mentor to Bangladesh’s principal founder and former president Mujibur Rahman. Her father served as Minister of Energy of the Jatiya military junta in the 1980s, but afterwards split off to form his own more democratically-minded faction. Born when the country was two years old, Tareen grew up surrounded by secular nationalist politicians—now the old guard in Bangladesh.

She couched her criticisms in American political language: “It’s a lot like what you see here: You have to get the Bible Belt to win the presidency. Religion is an easy card to play.” Hossain believes that fear of threats from the West increased fundamentalists’ popularity. The Jamaat was never in parliament before 9/11. Somewhat disdainfully, she added that the Jamaat does not practice Islam as outlined in the Quran. Instead, she said, it is similar to Wahabism, the belief system embraced by Al Qaeda.

Zeitlin pointed out that the Jamaat is only one of several Islamist groups, and he affirmed that those groups in the *Statesman* indeed exist in Bangladesh, though he re-iterated that no Indian media is a reliable source on its eastern neighbor. He writes:

Madrasahs run and funded by Islamic religious organizations are jammed with students learning that Christians and Jews are threat-

ening to bring down Islam as well as other anti-West vitriol. They are fertile ground for the growth of militant Islam seeking to impose Islamic law on Bangladesh.

Hossain compared *madrassas* to boarding schools, where poor young people receive free meals and a roof over their heads.

Hossain is not optimistic about the future of Bangladesh, where, she said, “The last election was rigged like nobody’s business.” She added, “Hindus are more oppressed than ever,” though inter-religious violence is not as bad as in India. “The world is losing its last moderate Muslim democracy,” she said.

Then why did educated secularists like Naser and Rabb discount this pressing concern? “The older generation will hate to admit that fundamentalism is rising,” said Hossain. Even if you asked her father, she said, he would deny it. Her father’s generation tends to be more idealistic and romanticize Bangladesh, she said; after-all it is the nation they fought to create.

Moinuddin Naser, writing later, said that he has observed the rise of disorganized Islamic militants —not Jamaat members—and was “scared that Bangladesh may be a sanctuary for terrorists.” Zeitlin agrees that in a poor, mostly-rural nation where the machinations of parliament are far removed from the common people, popular trends must be taken seriously. Traveling through a country where women have not been expected to cover up for over a century, he noticed more and more village women wearing the *burqa*. Slowly, a more conservative, possibly militant, form of Islam seems to be seeping into Bangladesh.

A Remedy Towards Good Government

Neither Naser, Rabb, Zeitlin or Hossain trust the powerful parties to cure an ill Bangladesh. Sayeed ur-Rabb’s brother M. M. Shaheen and Anwar Hossain Manju, friend of Zeitlin and father of Tareen Hossain, represent minority views in parliament, speaking up for democracy and against corruption. Yet none of those interviewed were optimistic. The solution, in Zeitlin’s words, is “a strong, representative, popular, accountable government.” Yet how such a system could emerge from the current chaos, none could say.

Andrea Muraskin is a junior at Bard College and majors in Global & International Studies. While at the Bard Program on Globalization and International Affairs, she interned at the Independent Press Association - New York.