

Political Polarization and Religious Extremism in Bangladesh

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Before the

Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific

United States House of Representatives

1st Session, 114th Congress

Hearing on “Bangladesh’s Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism”

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sherman, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you very much for the invitation to appear before you on the critically important issue of political and religious extremism in Bangladesh. I am honored to be part of this distinguished panel, and am grateful that you have chosen to focus on this significant country, one that remains relatively under-studied.

Bangladesh has been in the news for terrible reasons recently. On March 30 a young blogger, Washiqur Rahman, was hacked to death in Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka. That attack came on the heels of a similar murder the month before: another blogger, an American citizen named Avijit Roy, was stabbed and hacked to death February 26 as he left the Dhaka book fair. Two years earlier, in 2013, a blogger named Ahmed Rajib Haider was attacked in Dhaka and hacked to death with machetes. All three were targeted by radical Islamists for holding atheist views and writing about them openly.

As I have argued elsewhere, these assassinations have opened a new front between the values of a syncretic, secular, humanistic Bangladeshi culture against a rigid worldview incapable of allowing difference to coexist. These murders have been all the more troubling given Bangladesh’s comparative moderation and its well-known economic and development successes. The rise of this extreme form of violent Islam is occurring at a moment when Bangladeshi politics have become extremely polarized, and in a sense creating

a governance vacuum. I will offer a few words about the present political and economic situation before returning to the matter of Islamic extremism in the country.

Bangladesh's Politics Are Hurting Its Economy

Bangladesh is a country of nearly 160 million people of whom approximately 90 percent are Muslim. While no one would argue that Bangladeshi politics are congenial at the best of times, the last two years have been particularly bitter. The election of January 5, 2014 in which one major political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), refused to participate resulted in a landslide reelection of the Awami League. More than half the seats went uncontested. The Awami League government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now has a term that will run through late 2018.

The BNP refused to participate in the national election last year because elections were overseen by the Bangladesh Election Commission rather than a neutral caretaker government, as had been past practice. Efforts by Bangladeshis, foreign diplomats, and the United Nations to mediate and achieve a compromise between the BNP and Awami League in the run up to the 2014 elections failed. The BNP now calls January 5 “Murder of Democracy Day.” After a period of relative quiet during much of 2014, the BNP began renewed public strikes against the current government on January 5 of this year, paralyzing major cities for months. The BNP has added transportation blockades to its set of tactics. It hopes to use street pressure to achieve fresh elections.

Unfortunately public strikes in Bangladesh are not peaceful. These strikes, known as *hartals*, often result in violence. Images from strikes of the past year and a half include buses and trains set on fire and street fights. Since the January 5, 2015 renewal of strikes, more than 120 people have been killed, according to the latest press reports. These strikes are called by the BNP and the transport blockade has been endorsed at the highest levels of the party by chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. The BNP is supported by the Jamaat-e-Islami, which used to be a recognized political party in Bangladesh but has been banned from active politics due to its religious, not secular, platform. The Jamaat-e-Islami has a student wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir, which routinely appears in the headlines as the perpetrators of street violence.

It has not helped defuse the situation that Begum Zia faces graft charges for which she is now on bail, and was effectively under house arrest in her party office for weeks earlier this year. She has come under physical attack in public, most recently on April 22 in her motorcade while she was campaigning for city elections. The BNP says Awami League-backed thugs are responsible for the attack.

It has also not helped matters that the Awami League government has substantially cracked down on the opposition and on the media. Human Rights Watch issued a call earlier this year for the Bangladeshi government to end what they called arbitrary arrests, excessive use of force, and censorship. One leading BNP official, spokesman Salahuddin Ahmed, remains missing since March.

And the ongoing International Crimes Tribunal—seeking accountability and justice for the horrible crimes committed during Bangladesh's liberation struggle in 1971—adds further fuel to this combustible mix. That those responsible for committing crimes against humanity during those tragic months should be brought to justice is not in dispute. However, procedural flaws of these trials have raised questions about due process

for the defendants; for example, defendants sentenced to death have not been permitted appeal. Those under trial and convicted are primarily members of the Jamaat-e-Islami as well as a member of the BNP, further inflaming the overall atmosphere of polarization in Bangladesh.

None of this backdrop excuses the use of violence on the streets, but it does provide the context for today's fractures. Further, all of this is now taking a toll on the economy in ways that were not the case two years ago. Notably, Bangladesh's politics have been toxic for decades, and the country has managed to muddle through. It has more or less attained economic growth rates of between 5 and 6 percent for most of the last two decades. However, Bangladesh has been looking to accelerate its growth, particularly through its large export-oriented garment industry. The garment industry employs more than four million Bangladeshis, more than 80 percent women, and has been a bridge out of poverty for many. Its shortcomings in workplace safety and labor rights are of course well-known and I will not detail those here.

In mid-March, following the completion of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission to review the state of the Bangladeshi economy, mission lead Rodrigo Cubero issued a statement pointedly noting "the resurgence of unrest in recent months is taking a toll on the economy." The IMF lowered its forecast for Bangladesh's economic growth by half a percentage point, down to 6 percent.¹ This is now well below the Bangladeshi government's target of over 7 percent. Indeed, in February the finance minister of Bangladesh told a press conference that he doubted the country would be able to meet its 7.3 percent growth target due to political unrest.² A World Bank official told the *Los Angeles Times* that the larger economic toll of political unrest could be as high as \$2 billion.³

Bangladesh's garment industry has begun to speak about a decline in orders. The head of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Export Association (BGMEA) told the press that between foreign currency depreciation and political violence in Bangladesh, buyers are offering lower prices and "do not want to come to Bangladesh to place orders amid the violence." The newspaper *Prothom Alo* quoted an industry source assessing the downturn in orders at 30 to 40 percent.⁴ All of this is directly related to the instability and unrest arising from Bangladesh's extreme political polarization.

Islamist Violence in Bangladesh

I began by noting the assassinations of three atheist bloggers by Islamists in Bangladesh. But we should recognize that Bangladesh has come a long way since five hundred bombs exploded simultaneously in nearly every district in the country in August 2005. That attack, for which the terrorist group Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility, was a wake-up call for the region. While Bangladesh had been the home of the Pakistan-linked terrorist group known as the Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), implicated in plots to assassinate Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina, the August 2005

¹ International Monetary Fund, "Statement at the Conclusion of the IMF Mission for the Fifth and Sixth Reviews under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) Arrangement with Bangladesh," Press Release No. 15/103, March 10, 2015.

² "Muhith Fears Non-Attainment of GDP Growth Target for FY15," *The Financial Express*, February 8, 2015.

³ See "Businesses See Political Unrest Hitting Bangladesh's Image," *bdnews24.com*, March 3, 2015; see also Shashank Bengali and Mohiuddin Kader, "Bangladesh's long political crisis: Deaths and a Stilted Economy," *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2015.

⁴ "RMG Exports to Big Markets Nosedive," *Prothom Alo*, February 16, 2015.

synchronized explosions put Bangladesh, known for its moderate Islamic practices and never previously considered a hotbed of radicalism, on the international terrorism agenda. Bangladesh, then led by a BNP government, banned the JMB and HUJI-B in 2005.

Since then, successive Bangladeshi governments have focused intensively on tackling the internal terrorism threat, and have been largely successful in doing so. The Awami League government has also prioritized eliminating safehavens for insurgents focused on the northeastern Indian states, such as the group known as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Counterterrorism cooperation between the governments of India and Bangladesh has gone very well, as noted publicly in the joint communiqué issued during Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India.⁵ Bangladesh and the United States signed a Counterterrorism Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding in 2013, and continue to work together on this crucial area, including through technical exchange, training on law enforcement, and building stronger prosecution capacity.⁶ Against the backdrop of Bangladesh's successes countering terrorism, three disturbing developments bear watching.

First, the emergence of a new Islamist group in 2013 raised the stakes with their public demands against "atheist bloggers" and other perceived sins. Hefazat-e-Islam, formed in Chittagong in southeast Bangladesh in 2010, was not on the international radar screen until it staged a "long march" from Chittagong all the way to capital Dhaka in 2013 as a counterprotest to a largely secular youth protest group seeking the death penalty for those convicted of war crimes. The group released a set of thirteen austere demands that included: a blasphemy law with a death penalty provision; punishment for "atheist" bloggers and others who "insult Islam"; prevention of men and women from "free mixing"; ending of "anti-Islam women policy" and education policy; a demand to "stop turning Dhaka into a city of idols" and stop erecting sculptures; and several others.

All these demands struck counter to Bangladesh's longtime culture of moderation, emphasis on women and girls' development, culture of free expression, and appreciation of the arts. Hefazat-e-Islam is not a declared terrorist group, but in 2013 they indicated ability to employ violence toward their goals. The "Long March" of April 6, 2013 resulted in one death and injuries to more than one hundred, including journalists. A showdown between Hefazat and the police a month later turned more violent, with thirty-six dead and sixty injured.⁷ Hefazat has been quiet of late, but the possibility remains that they could mobilize.

The second area of concern which has emerged relates to the displaced, dispossessed Rohingya people. The government of Myanmar believes the Rohingya to be "Bengali-speaking Muslims" who came to Myanmar from Bangladesh; the government of Bangladesh believes the Rohingya are Muslims of Myanmar's Rakhine province just bordering southeast Bangladesh. Bangladesh has sheltered thirty thousand documented Rohingya refugees officially for some thirty years; UNHCR estimated the total number of undocumented at two hundred thousand, and some Bangladeshi estimates of total undocumented Rohingya refugees range as high as five hundred thousand. The issue has been the single most salient bilateral irritant between

⁵ People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Communique issued on the Occasion of the Visit to India of Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh," January 12, 2010.

⁶ See U.S. Department of Justice, "DOJ/OPDAT Counterterrorism Programs," <http://www.justice.gov/criminal/opdat/worldact-programs/ctu.html>.

⁷ David Bergman and Dean Nelson, "36 Killed in Dhaka as Islamic Militants Clash with Police," the *Telegraph (UK)*, May 6, 2013.

Bangladesh and Myanmar over the years.

Reports in Bangladesh and in India have identified an emerging concern about radicalization of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, including potential recruitment into terrorist groups. According to a report released in 2013 from the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, some Rohingya refugees have joined “hardline” Muslim organizations, and the report notes that the Rohingya Students Organization has formed a partnership with HUIJI-B.⁸ Reports have appeared in the Indian and Bangladeshi press that the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the Mumbai attacks of 2008, has been trying to recruit Rohingya refugees, including for potential attacks on India.⁹

Third, the dramatic spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State into Afghanistan and Ayman al-Zawahiri’s announcement last fall of a new “Indian Subcontinent” subsidiary of al-Qaeda have captured substantial attention. In January Bangladesh authorities arrested four men suspected of Islamic State membership. Last September, a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in Dhaka under charges of recruiting for the Islamic State.

What the official debut of “al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent” will mean is not yet clear. Al-Qaeda’s appeal has proven limited over the course of the last twenty years, and it is not certain that the mere declared ambition for a subcontinental al-Qaeda subsidiary stretching all the way to Bangladesh and Myanmar will attract many followers. But it is something to watch closely.

Recommendations for U.S. policy

The United States has good policies in place to cooperate with Bangladesh, including training and technical cooperation. But given Bangladesh’s situation of fragility discussed above, there are some areas I would recommend for additional attention. All U.S. assistance data discussed below comes from the FY2016 and FY2015 Congressional Budget Justification Appendix 3 documents, along with the FY2014 Executive Budget Summary for historical figures.

- 1. Support the requested increase in resources focused on democracy and governance programs in U.S. assistance to Bangladesh—and consider supplementing further.** Bangladesh is widely regarded as a development success story, and a country where development investments deliver great returns. But the growth in U.S. assistance to Bangladesh has been concentrated in health, food security, and climate change. The resources available to provide democracy and governance support to Bangladesh are small compared with the outlays for those three categories. All of these are important, but it has become increasingly clear that attention to democracy and governance issues should be increased given the impact of the country’s political problems. The FY2016 request increases levels for rule of law and human rights, as well as political competition and consensus building, bringing them

⁸ Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Mitra and Associates, and Saferworld, *Safety and Security in the South-East Border Area of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Saferworld, 2013).

⁹ Shishir Gupta, “Lashkar Radicalizes Rohingya to Wage War Against India,” *Hindustan Times*, August 2, 2013.

from a combined \$3 million in the FY2015 request to a combined \$9.8 million. Compared with \$71 million for health, \$50 million for food security, and \$17 million for climate change, there is room to do more.

U.S. Foreign Assistance to Bangladesh

(\$ in thousands)	FY2012 Actual	FY2013 Actual	FY2014 Actual	FY2015 Request	FY2016 Request
TOTAL		202,402	205,051	168,700	208,883
Development Assistance	81,686	79,301	81,578	82,400	92,923
<i>Food Security—productivity</i>				50,000	50,000
<i>Food Security—competitiveness</i>				2,500	3,500
<i>Climate Change</i>				16,900	17,000
<i>Civil Society/Labor and Workplace Safety</i>				6,000	9,000
<i>Combat Trafficking in Persons</i>				1,000	1,100
<i>Rule of Law and Human Rights</i>				2,000	6,000
<i>Political Competition & Consensus Building</i>				1,000	3,800
<i>Basic Education</i>				3,000	2,000
Foreign Military Financing (FMF)	2,200	2,848	2,500	2,000	2,000
Global Health Programs—USAID	71,600	74,005	79,500	78,200	71,200
International Military Education and Training (IMET)	994	1,067	996	1,500	1,500
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE)	1,394	2,000	2,600	1,250	2,000
Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR)		3,214	3,350	3,350	3,260
P.L. 480 Title II		39,967	34,527	-	3,600

*Data from FY2016 and FY2015 Congressional Budget Justification Appendix 3 Data;
FY2012 Data from FY2014 Executive Budget Summary*

As another point of comparison, the FY2016 request for Pakistan (OCO) seeks \$36.1 million for conflict mitigation; \$9.6 million for rule of law and human rights; \$14.6 million for good governance; and \$4.9 million for political competition and consensus building, for a total of \$65.2 million in this general category. That is more than six and a half times the figure for the FY2016 request for Bangladesh. It is hard to understand why we cannot allocate even a little more to this important area of concern in Bangladesh.

2. **Continue and expand the growing U.S.-Bangladesh counterterrorism and security cooperation.** This has been an area of successful cooperation. Bangladesh seeks our assistance, is trying

to do more, and can benefit from our continued support. Relatively small amounts of assistance can go a long way, particularly on topics like community policing, anti-money laundering, counterterrorist financing, and strengthening capacity within the justice system. We should certainly continue support for efforts to reform Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion, a paramilitary force long accused of use of excessive force. This has been a program under the U.S. Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP)—one that is not large, and could be further supported.

Levels for security assistance (FMF, IMET, INCLE, and NADR) were at \$8.1 million in the FY2015 request and are \$8.76 million in the FY2016 request. By comparison, the same budget request for Pakistan in the non-OCO account for FY2016 is almost \$61 million. I recognize that Pakistan's state of insecurity and its role in supporting operations in Afghanistan are a qualitatively different situation—and I am not including the additional \$265 million in FMF in the OCO account—but it also strikes me that even doubling the support for security cooperation with Bangladesh would amount to a tiny fraction of what we provide to Pakistan.

3. **Deepen security consultation with India about Bangladesh.** Regular consultations covering security matters in South Asia should be continued and enhanced, especially given the developments discussed above (Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Rohingya radicalization), which India watches closely.
4. **Continue looking for ways to incentivize political reconciliation in Bangladesh.** Finding a way to bridge the chasm between Bangladesh's two major political parties, and the deep personal enmity that drives their differences, has proven Sisyphean. International mediation including by the UN has not succeeded. The United States should look for positive incentives to emphasize more robustly, such as the prospect of a Millennium Challenge Corporation threshold program, should Bangladesh reach a better situation of governance and law and order. A threshold program could incentivize further reforms leading to the possibility of a compact, which are much larger assistance levels than Bangladesh currently receives.

We should also, at every possible juncture, continue to impress upon the Bangladesh government as well as the opposition the enormous opportunity cost to the country from its ongoing political stalemate. Given its current circumstances, Bangladesh has moved far away from the projections made by investment banks Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan in 2005 and 2007, respectively. In those years, Bangladesh appeared among the Goldman Sachs "Next 11" countries to watch and as one of the JP Morgan "Frontier Five." Under present conditions, the outlook is much less positive. But it is a country with a spirit of entrepreneurship, great potential, and enormous unrealized promise still to come. A better political environment, and by that I mean one without violence, not necessarily one of partisan bonhomie, would position Bangladesh for great things.