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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Bangladesh's Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism

**Testimony before the
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The recent political turmoil in Bangladesh threatens to derail economic and social progress and set back democratic development in this pivotal nation with the fourth-largest Muslim population in the world. Islamist extremists have recently murdered two Bangladeshi journalists, raising concern that religious militants will take advantage of any prolonged political unrest. The U.S. must adopt a more assertive role in encouraging Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government and the leading opposition party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), headed by former prime minister Khaleda Zia, to pursue dialogue to break the political deadlock and restore stability.

On January 5, the one-year anniversary of the flawed election that brought Sheikh Hasina back to power, the BNP launched protest demonstrations under the slogan "Murder of Democracy Day." As part of the protests, the opposition called for a transport blockade, fueling street clashes that have killed more than 120 people in the last four months. Particularly disturbing was a series of petrol bombings on buses that killed or injured hundreds of innocent bystanders. Media reports indicate that as many as 7,000 opposition activists have been detained by the police and that 20 opposition supporters have allegedly died under extra-judicial circumstances.²

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² Raza Rumi, "Bangladesh on the Brink," *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2015.

The recent round of protests and political violence has its roots in the 2014 elections that were marred by lack of opposition participation and an unusually low voter turn-out. The U.S. State Department issued a statement on January 6, 2014, expressing disappointment in the election process, and said that the results did not credibly represent the will of the Bangladeshi people.³

The U.S. had previously held up Bangladesh as a model of a large Muslim country with a functioning democracy. Moreover, Bangladesh has made significant social and economic gains over the last decade. Life expectancy has increased by 10 years, infant mortality has decreased by nearly two-thirds, female literacy has doubled, and economic growth has averaged around 6 percent annually. But, with the country essentially under one-party rule for the last 16 months, the democratic process is under threat. Furthermore, the violent reaction from the opposition to Sheikh Hasina's increasingly autocratic approach to governing is putting social and economic progress at risk.

Bangladesh has held regular elections for the last 20 years—with one exception in 2007, when the military took power for nearly two years following escalating political violence and the failure of the political parties to agree on modalities for holding elections.

A similar scenario developed in 2013, when the Sheikh Hasina government refused to step down in favor of a neutral caretaker government during the election period. Prime Minister Hasina moved forward with the election without opposition participation. Half of the parliamentary seats went uncontested, and voter turnout was around 30 to 35 percent, significantly below the 86 percent turnout at the 2008 election. The Awami League won 232 of 300 parliamentary seats.

The Bangladeshi military has so far shown no indication that it will intervene to break the political deadlock as it did in 2007, although this could change if the situation deteriorates significantly. Sheikh Hasina has reportedly reduced chances of military involvement in politics by providing the Army a greater role in the economy.⁴ Another motivating factor keeping the military out of politics is the battering that its image took from charges of corruption when it was in power in 2007 and 2008.

In June 2011, the Awami League government amended the constitution to abolish the caretaker system of government, which had been in place since 1996, although it failed to prevent pre-election violence and turmoil in the 2006 election. In May 2011, the Bangladeshi Supreme Court ruled that the caretaker government system should be retained for the next two parliamentary elections, a ruling that Sheikh Hasina ignored. Furthermore, an Asia Foundation survey conducted in September 2013 revealed that a large majority of Bangladeshis (77 percent) preferred that elections be held under a neutral interim administration, as in the past.

³ News release, "Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh," U.S. Department of State, January 6, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/219331.htm> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁴ Frederic Grare, "Is Bangladesh's Crisis About to Get Much Worse?" *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2015, at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/is-bangladeshs-crisis-about-to-get-much-worse/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

Human Rights Concerns

The opposition protests and violent street clashes have led to a widespread government crackdown and reports of human rights violations by the Bangladeshi authorities. BNP Secretary General Salahuddin Ahmed has disappeared after being apprehended on March 10 by men identifying themselves as police.⁵ The Bangladeshi police inspector general denied holding Ahmed in custody after his wife filed a habeas corpus writ in the High Court demanding the police produce her husband before a court.

A Bangladeshi civil rights group says it has documented the cases of 37 people that were killed by security forces in February, often after being taken into police custody. A separate human rights organization says 32 people were killed “extra-judicially” (including 22 killed in alleged “crossfire”) from January 5 to February 8, 2015.

Islamist Politics and Extremist Violence

The leading Islamist political party, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), is currently banned from participating in elections, and its top leaders have either been executed or are facing death sentences for their roles in siding with Pakistani forces during Bangladesh’s 1971 war for independence.

In 2010, the Sheikh Hasina government established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to punish those responsible for crimes committed during the Bangladeshi independence movement. It is alleged that around three million Bengalis were killed, and over 200,000 women raped, by Pakistani security forces and their JeI supporters during the independence struggle. The International Crimes Tribunal Act of 1973 was originally passed to try nearly 200 alleged war criminals soon after Bangladesh gained independence. In a subsequent treaty signed between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, however, the alleged war criminals were pardoned. Previous Bangladeshi governments have avoided reviving the war crimes trials, fearing unanticipated repercussions.

The international human rights community has raised questions about the impartiality of the tribunal’s proceedings and whether Sheikh Hasina is using the tribunal as a tool against political opponents.⁶ Supporters of Hasina say that the ICT is prosecuting the most violent war criminals in the country’s history.

The ICT trials have found favor with a large segment of the Bangladeshi population, especially the young urban middle class. The Shahbag movement is named after the square where people gathered in February 2013 to protest what they considered lenient sentencing of Abdul Qader Mollah, the first defendant prosecuted by the tribunal. Mollah was a leader in the JeI’s youth organization in 1971. After he was sentenced to life in

⁵ Ellen Barry, “Amid Political Confrontations in Bangladesh, a Search for a Missing Opposition Official,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2015.

⁶ “Bangladesh: Azam Conviction Based on Flawed Proceedings,” Human Rights Watch, August 16, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/16/bangladesh-azam-conviction-based-flawed-proceedings> (accessed April 29, 2015).

prison, young protesters took to the streets and demanded reconsideration of the court's decision and the imposition of the death penalty. The protesters further demanded an official ban on the JeI and all Islamist extremist groups.

In August 2013, the Dhaka High Court declared the JeI's political party registration illegal on grounds that its charter does not recognize parliament as the sole institution to pass laws and because it bars non-Muslims and women from leading the party. In November 2013, in agreement with the High Court verdict, Election Commissioner Shah Nawaz declared that the party could not participate in the national elections.

The government followed through on the Shahbag protesters' demands on December 12, 2013, and executed senior JeI leader Abdul Qader Mollah, provoking rioting among Islamists that led to five deaths in a 24-hour period. Two weeks ago, the government executed another senior JeI leader, Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, for war crimes including rape, torture, and murder. International human rights organizations urged Bangladesh not to carry out the execution, arguing that the trial procedures did not meet international standards. Following the execution of Kamaruzzaman, the State Department issued a statement condemning the action but also noting progress in the ICT process and the "judicial rigor" applied to the Kamaruzzaman court ruling.⁷

The JeI has a small support base mostly in rural areas. It won between 4 percent and 5 percent of the vote in the 2008 elections. The JeI's youth organization has branches nationwide and is an effective recruitment arm for the political party, but has a reputation for militancy and provoking violent clashes with opposing groups. When the BNP ruled the country from 2001 to 2006, it formed an alliance with the JeI, allowing JeI members to hold cabinet positions for the first time.

The JeI has been responsible for numerous attacks against religious minority communities in Bangladesh. Most recently, in the run-up to the January 5 election, Islamists torched hundreds of Hindu homes, injuring scores. When the JeI was part of the governing coalition from 2001 to 2006, Islamists initiated a campaign against the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh and demanded that the government declare them non-Muslims.⁸

In the backdrop of the political turmoil and ongoing war crimes trials, the country continues to face a threat from Islamist extremists. There is some fear that the violent Islamists will take advantage of the political unrest to push their agenda. These fears were compounded in late February when Bangladeshi-American activist and liberal commentator Avijit Roy was hacked to death by Islamists in the streets of Dhaka.

⁷New release, "Statement on the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) Death Sentence of Kamaruzzaman," U.S. Department of State, April 11, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240591.htm> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁸ The Ahmadiyya movement has approximately 10 million followers in the world, and makes up less than 1 percent of the Bangladeshi population. Toward the end of the 19th century, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), founder of Ahmadiyya, broke with centuries-old Islamic dogma by claiming to be an Islamic prophet. (Mainstream Muslims believe that Mohammed was the last prophet.)

Another liberal blogger, Washiqur Rahman, was similarly murdered by Islamists in late March.

The emergence of a new extremist group, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which draws inspiration from the global jihadist movement, has further raised concerns that al-Qaeda is seeking to exploit the increasingly volatile politics in Bangladesh. The existence of ABT was revealed after the arrests of five Bangladeshi students in the February 2013 murder of secular blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, who had played a key role in organizing peaceful street protests against the Islamist agenda.⁹ ABT members were reportedly influenced by al-Qaeda materials that had been translated into Bengali. Bangladeshi police say the group has been around for several years but has little organizational structure. On August 12, 2013, ABT leader Mufti Jasmuddin Rahmani and 30 of his followers were arrested.

Two years ago, violent protests over the death sentence for a senior JeI leader killed nearly 150. Hefazat-e-Islam (Protectors of Islam), a coalition of radical Islamist organizations that run madrassas throughout the country, marched on Dhaka in May 2013 to protest death sentences for Islamist leaders. Hefazat-e-Islam also issued a 13-point charter calling for banning the mixing of women and men, instituting a harsh new blasphemy law, declaring the minority Ahmadis non-Muslims, and making Islamic education mandatory at the primary and secondary level.

During her previous term in office (December 2008–January 2014), Sheikh Hasina was proactive in cracking down on radical Islamists and in emphasizing the secular principles of the country’s founding. Three years ago, the Supreme Court restored Bangladesh’s status as a secular—as opposed to Islamic—republic.¹⁰ The Hasina government successfully dismantled one of the deadliest groups, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which carried out several attacks in 2005 and 2006.¹¹ The law enforcement and intelligence agencies have also acted aggressively against extremists, leading to arrests and disruptions of terrorist plots.

Given JeI’s violent record, the government’s concerns about the group are justified, but it should also consider that cracking down on peaceful avenues of political participation could have the effect of reinforcing JeI’s violent tendencies and make the problem worse. Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary-general of Citizens for Good Governance, recently commented in a *Wall Street Journal* article that, “If all avenues of political discourse are

⁹Shahriar Sharif, “New Extremist Group Causes Headache in Bangladesh,” *KhabarSouthAsia.com*, April 3, 2013, http://khabarsouthasia.com/en_GB/articles/apwi/articles/features/2013/04/03/feature-02 (accessed April 28, 2015).

¹⁰ Sadanand Dume, “Bangladesh’s Good Fight against Islamism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 2015.

¹¹ Maneeza Hossain and Lisa Curtis, “Bangladesh: Checking Islamist Extremism in a Pivotal Democracy,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2383, March 15, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/03/bangladesh-checking-islamist-extremism-in-a-pivotal-democracy> (accessed April 29, 2015).

closed, Islamist parties that are part of electoral politics here could renounce the political system and become our Taliban.”¹²

Supporters of Sheikh Hasina’s agenda against the JeI say it will give Bangladeshi secularism a chance to grow roots and create a model of a Muslim-majority state defined more by language and culture than by faith.¹³

Political Unrest Taking Economic Toll

The political unrest is hampering Bangladesh’s economic outlook. The garment industry—which makes up 75 percent of the country’s exports—is already poised to take a hit. Delivery schedules have been disrupted and investor confidence has dipped due to the political tumult. Garment buyers are starting to shift their orders to countries like Indonesia because of the political tensions and instability in Bangladesh. A recent World Bank report states that the Bangladeshi economy suffered losses of around \$2.2 billion (1 percent of GDP) as a result of the political violence that rocked the country in January and February.¹⁴

Bangladesh has made remarkable economic gains in the last decade. Exports have risen from \$6.5 billion in 2000 to over \$30 billion in 2014, largely because of growth in the garment industry, which employs over four million women and has turned Bangladesh into a global exporter of ready-made clothing, second only to China. Bangladesh is on a path to becoming a middle-income country within the next decade and of achieving food self-sufficiency by 2020. More Bangladeshi girls attend school than in neighboring countries and, according to the Legatum Prosperity Index, Bangladesh has surpassed India in terms of quality of life because of longer life spans, lower levels of undernourishment, lower rates of infant mortality, and better access to sanitation facilities.¹⁵

While Bangladesh’s economic progress is commendable, serious challenges remain. Thirty percent of Bangladeshis live below the poverty line—including much of the workforce responsible for the recent economic growth. The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in April 2013 that killed over 1,100 workers shows that attention to worker and building safety regulations and compliance have not kept pace with higher rates of economic growth. Bangladesh will risk facing more garment-factory tragedies

¹² Syed Zain Al-Mahmood, “Amid Political Chaos, Bangladesh Fears a Rise in Militancy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2015.

¹³ Conversation with Sadanand Dhume, Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute.

¹⁴ “Political turmoil cost Bangladesh \$2.2 billion in three months of 2015: World Bank,” *bdnews24.com*, April 12, 2015, at <http://bdnews24.com/economy/2015/04/12/political-turmoil-cost-bangladesh-2.2-billion-in-three-months-of-2015-world-bank> (accessed April 29, 2015).

¹⁵ “Bangladesh Overtakes India in Overall Prosperity,” *The Daily Star*, November 4, 2013, <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/bangladesh-overtakes-india-in-overall-prosperity/> (accessed April 29, 2015).

until it works with international stakeholders and makes a concerted effort to improve safety.¹⁶

Recommendations:

The U.S. must take a more active role in discouraging further political unrest in Bangladesh, which is undermining the country's social and economic prospects and runs the risk of being exploited by Islamist radicals to forward their agenda of overturning the democratic process. Prolonged political deadlock or escalating street violence could also lead to another military coup along the lines of what occurred in 2007. In either scenario, both the Awami League and BNP would suffer. To avoid either of these outcomes, the U.S. should:

- **Work with like-minded democratic countries to foster dialogue between the Awami League and BNP camps to reduce political tensions.** The U.S. should work with other countries that take a neutral position on Bangladeshi politics—such as the U.K., Canada, Australia, South Korea, and Japan—to convince Sheikh Hasina to initiate a genuine dialogue with BNP leaders aimed at restoring a peaceful democratic process.

The U.S. should also coordinate efforts with India, although so far New Delhi has seemed unwilling to use its influence with Sheikh Hasina to convince her to reach out to the opposition. Indian leaders seem to calculate that their interests are better served with the Awami League in power and thus they have been reluctant to pressure Hasina to provide political space to the BNP. New Delhi's position, however, may be short-sighted. If Sheikh Hasina faces little or no international resistance to her increasingly authoritarian approach to governing, Bangladeshi politics will almost certainly turn increasingly violent and radical Islamist groups will more easily gain recruits.

- **Be more vocal in criticizing both the opposition's violent tactics and the government's failure to provide adequate political space for the opposition.** The U.S. should press the Hasina government either to release the thousands of detained opposition activists currently in jail or to move forward with their cases, according to due process of law. It is necessary to bring to justice those responsible for killing innocent bystanders, especially the victims of the unprecedented petrol bombings. The U.S. must also raise its concerns about disappeared BNP political leader Salahuddin Ahmed, and call on the government to prioritize his safe return to his family.
- **Encourage a civil society dialogue on the future of Bangladeshi politics and democracy that involves the younger generation and is aimed at empowering**

¹⁶ Lisa Curtis and Maneeza Hossain, "Combating Islamism in South Asia: Keeping Bangladesh on the Democratic Path," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2870, December 20, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/12/combating-islamism-in-south-asia-keeping-bangladesh-on-the-democratic-path> (accessed April 29, 2015).

local groups to advocate for non-violent politics. Such a dialogue should involve a variety of political, economic, and religious civic organizations and individuals without political affiliations. Through conferences and meetings, the U.S. should encourage discussion among the various civil society groups on strengthening the democratic process and countering violent extremism. The dialogue could include young JeI leaders, who would be encouraged to reform the party by firmly opposing violence, respecting the rights of religious minorities, and reflecting modern Bangladeshi society's achievements, including the increase in women's participation in the social, economic, and political life of the country.

- **Incentivize Sheikh Hasina's government to create conditions for political stability through the prospect of greater U.S. trade and investment.** The U.S. represents Bangladesh's biggest export market, and expanding those export markets and attracting more U.S. investment into the country are important goals for Dhaka. The U.S. should make clear that, as political stability returns to the country, Washington will encourage and facilitate trade and investment delegations to the country.

Conclusion:

Political deadlock between the ruling Awami League and BNP opposition is threatening economic and social progress and opening the door for Islamist extremists to gain more recruits and increase their influence in the country. The U.S., in coordination with other interested democratic partners, must seek to convince the two sides to resolve their differences through dialogue, noting that both political parties stand to suffer if political tensions continue or worsen.