



## **“Bangladesh’s Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism”**

**Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee,  
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

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### **Introduction**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking member Sherman, and respected Members of the Subcommittee, it is a privilege for me to appear before you today to testify on a topic of critical importance to regional stability and U.S. strategic interests in South Asia.

As the Director of Government Relations for the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a non-profit advocacy and human rights organization that has been monitoring and documenting religious freedom and human rights conditions in South Asia for twelve years, I am deeply concerned by the escalating crisis in Bangladesh. I would like to acknowledge the work of HAF Senior Director and Human Rights Fellow, Samir Kalra, Esq., who is the author of our annual human rights report.

An important U.S. ally and trading partner in South Asia, Bangladesh has been engulfed by political turmoil and large-scale violence since 2013. While the Awami League government has contributed to the current unrest by undermining democratic processes and suppressing political dissent, the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its Islamist coalition partner, Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel), have been primarily responsible for the recent bout of political violence and instability.

Specifically, the BNP-Jamaat alliance has engaged in violent street riots, disrupted public transportation systems utilizing small bombs, forced economic blockades and shutdowns known as “hartals”, and carried out targeted attacks on religious minorities and secular activists. All of these tactics have been carried out in an attempt to create chaos and destabilize the current government. In the first four months of 2015 alone, more than one hundred innocent Bangladeshi citizens have been killed and hundreds more injured, while the violence has cost the economy billions of dollars in lost revenue.

I witnessed first-hand the damage caused by this political unrest and its impact on the daily lives of ordinary Bangladeshis when I visited Dhaka earlier this year on a fact-finding mission for the Hindu American Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The HAF fact-finding mission to Dhaka, Bangladesh spanned a seven day period, from January 29 to February 5, 2015.

During my trip, where I was joined by HAF volunteer and native Bengali speaker, Utsav Chakrabarti, we also met with dozens of civil society leaders, human rights activists, minority groups, and three members of Parliament,<sup>2</sup> all of whom expressed serious concern with the rising tide of religious intolerance, extremism, and the burgeoning threat of pro-ISIS activity in the country.

Three weeks after I left Bangladesh, Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi American writer and blogger, was brutally murdered in front of the heavily guarded Dhaka Book Fair by Islamic extremists for his outspoken criticism of religious fundamentalism. And merely five weeks after Roy's death, a second blogger in Bangladesh, Washikur Rahman, was also killed in broad daylight for espousing similar views on religious extremism.

The attacks on Roy and Rahman were not isolated incidents, but rather reflective of a systematic attempt by radical Islamist groups to undermine the nation's secular fabric.

A prominent secular activist and practicing Muslim whom we met with, for instance, described his trepidation with the increasing Islamization of Bangladeshi society, including in public school textbooks, and its implications for communal harmony and religious freedom. He has publicly stated that he is also under threat by Islamists.

It is my hope, and that of the many Bangladeshis with whom I interacted during my time in the country that:

1. Both the Bangladesh and U.S. governments declare Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir as illegal organization and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) respectively;
2. Any officials from Jamaat-e-Islami that have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom as defined by U.S. laws be denied entry into the United States and any members of Jamaat-e-Islami currently residing in the U.S. who have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom be investigated;
3. The U.S. government strongly condemn all political violence and attacks by Islamist groups and work constructively with the current Bangladeshi government to ensure that attacks on religious minorities and atheists cease in addition to bringing justice to past victims of violence;
4. All future economic and military aid to Bangladesh be conditioned on improved conditions for religious and ethnic minorities, including increased representation of minorities in various levels of Bangladeshi public life.

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<sup>2</sup> We were only able to meet with Awami League representatives in Parliament, as our meeting requests to BNP officials were ignored.

## Background

The roots of the current crisis date back to the country's inception in 1971, when Bangladesh achieved independence from Pakistan. That brutal conflict left an estimated three million ethnic Bengalis dead - primarily Hindu, more than ten million displaced, and 200,000 women raped.

The Hindu minority, in particular, bore the brunt of the violence. Hindus were targeted by the Pakistani military and its local Islamist collaborators on a scale and in a manner that constituted "genocide", according to Gary Bass, Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and author of *"The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide."*

Although the Bangladeshi independence movement had emerged from the culmination of several longstanding factors, including linguistic, cultural, economic, and political repression by West Pakistan, at its core it represented an ideological contest between Islamism, perpetuated by Islamabad, and secularism, representing the larger Bengali movement.

That battle continued in the post-independence period due to the assassination of the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, by military officers. Subsequent coups and dictator regimes in Bangladesh have fostered the growth of radical Islam in state affairs. As Islam began to play a greater role in public life and the Constitution was amended multiple times to elevate the status of Islam and Muslims above other religions,<sup>3</sup> Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Ahmadiyyas, and atheists were effectively institutionalized as second-class citizens.

The process of Islamization and religious repression accelerated with the 2001 election of the BNP and its Islamist allies, including Jamaat-e-Islami. During the five-year rule of the BNP-led coalition beginning in 2001, Bangladesh witnessed the increased role of Islam in politics and an explosion of madrasas (Islamic seminaries) teaching the same fundamentalist version of Islam that inspired the Taliban.

Moreover, activity by Muslim militants and radical organizations, such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), a State Department designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO),<sup>4</sup> and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), significantly increased during the BNP regime.

## Growing Religious Extremism and Intolerance

In recent years, Islamist organizations, such as Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), have been rapidly gaining ground in Bangladesh. Despite their relatively smaller numbers, these Islamist organizations exert disproportionate influence over the country's political, social, legal, and religious affairs. They have consistently utilized violent tactics, including bombings, political assassinations, and targeted killings in pursuance of their religio-political goal of creating a theocratic state with limited rights for minorities, atheists, and women.

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<sup>3</sup> "Bangladesh Parliament Votes to make Islam State Religion," (June 8, 1988), The New York Times, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940DE5D71530F93BA35755C0A96E94826>.

<sup>4</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

Jamaat-e-Islami is the most powerful Islamist group in the country and has been the ideological center and recruiting base for several terrorist groups in Bangladesh, including Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh. Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh has carried out several high-profile bombings and was responsible for a bomb blast in India's West Bengal state as recently as October 2014. The blast was reportedly part of a larger plan to target Hindu religious festivals in the state in conjunction with the Indian Mujahideen, a State Department designated FTO.<sup>5</sup>

Jamaat-e-Islami also enjoys extensive links to the wider militant network operating in South Asia and has also been intimately involved in facilitating terrorist activities outside of Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup>

Emblematic of Jamaat-e-Islami's commitment to a narrow sectarian agenda, in his final interview prior to his execution for committing war crimes during the 1971 war, Mohammad Kamaruzzaman, assistant secretary of the organization, expressed his desire that Islamist forces would "dominate politics and govern Bangladesh."<sup>7</sup>

Another Islamist organization, Hefazat-e-Islam, gained notoriety in 2013 after calling for the prosecution and execution of "atheist bloggers," as part of its 13-point Islamist agenda. The charter included, in part, "banning women from the work force by ending 'free mixing' of the sexes, a harsh new blasphemy law similar to Pakistan's, the declaration of the beleaguered Ahmadi sect as non-Muslim, and an end to 'candle lighting in the name of personal freedom and free speech.'"<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Hefazat's agenda demanded the removal of sculptures, "special protection" for Islam, and reinstatement of references to Allah in the constitution.<sup>9</sup>

Hefazat derives its strength from its control over many of the country's madrassas (Islamic schools), where one of Washikur Rahman's killers was a student. According to the Center For Inquiry, a leading secular human rights organization, at least eight bloggers have been attacked by Islamist groups such as Hefazat, Islami Chattra Shibir, and Ansar-Bangla 7, since 2004. And countless other bloggers critical of growing extremism have gone into hiding after receiving death threats from Islamist groups.

Beyond the dangers posed by indigenous Islamist groups, the expanding threat of ISIS activities in Bangladesh should raise concerns for the international community. In October 2014, for example, a British man was arrested by Bangladeshi authorities near the capital of Dhaka while recruiting for

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<sup>5</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Terrorist and Extremist Groups – Bangladesh, South Asia Terrorism Portal, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/terroristoutfits/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Bangladesh's Kamaruzzaman Hopes Before Execution", (April 13, 2015) On Islam <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/asia-pacific/484995-bangladeshs-kamaruzzaman-hopes-before-execution.html>

<sup>8</sup> Dhume, Sadanand, "Bangladesh on the Brink," (May 9, 2013), The Wall Street Journal, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB100014241278873237446045784725232260433>.

<sup>9</sup> Grahame, Lucas, "Bangladeshi Islamists are Gaining Ground," (September 5, 2013), DW, <http://www.dw.de/bangladeshi-islamists-are-gaining-ground/a-16798966>

ISIS under the guise of Tablighi Jamaat, a missionary Islamic group with terrorist links. And in January 2015, four other individuals were arrested for their links to ISIS.

Since Islamist organizations, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, share a similar ideology with ISIS and a common agenda of creating an Islamic state, formal collaboration would be catastrophic for this nation of 166 million.

## Escalating Anti-Minority Violence

Amidst the recent political unrest, there has been a concurrent escalation in anti-minority violence that began in 2013.

In late January 2013, after the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), commissioned to investigate war crimes from the 1971 War of Independence, started announcing convictions of high-level Jamaat and BNP officials, supporters of these organizations engaged in large-scale violence and rioting. The violence plagued Bangladesh for several weeks, resulting in more than 100 deaths and hundreds of injuries. Jamaat and Islami Chhatra Shibir activists reportedly also set off small bombs in the capital city of Dhaka, aimed at causing panic amongst ordinary Bangladeshi citizens.

The Hindu community, in particular, was systematically attacked with more than 47 temples destroyed and approximately 700 - 1500 homes vandalized or burned to the ground (estimates vary) at the beginning of 2013. In the aftermath of the violence, Amnesty International noted with concern that the Hindu community in Bangladesh was at extreme risk.

The Hindu minority was similarly targeted by Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir, in the run-up to and during elections in early 2014, when an estimated 495 Hindu homes were damaged, 585 shops were attacked or looted, and 169 temples were vandalised according to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.

Women have been especially vulnerable during recent bouts of anti-minority violence, and many Hindu women have been sexually assaulted and raped by members of Jamaat-e-Islami and its affiliates, according to first-hand information received from the Women's Wing of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian United Council.

Parliamentarian Chhabi Biswas, from the Netrokona-1 district, described to us the warnings he received from radical Islamists to stay silent during election violence targeting members of the Hindu community. As a result of his refusal to comply, his car was bombed on December 24 by BNP activists.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Biswas narrowly escaped death and is still serving as a Member of Parliament.

And as recently as April 11, 2015, at least three Hindu temples were attacked in the aftermath of Mohammad Kamaruzzaman's execution.

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<sup>10</sup> "AL MP Chhabi Biswas as BNP-AL supporters clash", (BDNews24.com)  
<http://bdnews24.com/politics/2014/12/24/al-mp-chhabi-biswas-assaulted-as-bnp-al-supporters-clash>

Hindus and other religious minorities, as well as atheists, remain in critical danger, as long as Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamist groups are allowed to operate with impunity.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Given Bangladesh's strategic location and importance as a trade partner, its internal security and stability are essential to U.S. national interests in South Asia. These core objectives, however, are undermined by the ongoing political violence, repeated attacks on religious minorities and atheists, expanding religious intolerance and suppression of free speech, and growing destabilization caused by radical groups, including Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir.

Conditions in Bangladesh also have wider regional implications, including the large-scale migration of Bangladeshis into India, along with the increased infiltration of narcotics, arms, and militants across the border.

Consequently, the U.S. should more actively engage with the Government of Bangladesh over our shared interests in safeguarding human rights, religious freedom, and secular democracy in Bangladesh, while preventing the growth of religious extremism and militancy.

Furthermore, on behalf of the Hindu American Foundation, I respectfully submit the following recommendations to this Subcommittee:

1. The U.S. should strongly encourage the Government of Bangladesh to declare Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir illegal organizations, based on their long-standing involvement in terrorist activities and violence against religious minorities, and impose complete bans on their activities.
2. Similarly, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir should be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under section 1(b) of Executive Order 13224,<sup>11</sup> as their activities threaten American national security and economic interests in Bangladesh and the wider region.
3. Under section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the U.S. should deny entry to any officials from Jamaat-e-Islami that have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom as defined by section 3 of the International Religious Freedom Act,<sup>12</sup> and investigate any members of Jamaat-e-Islami currently residing in the U.S. who have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom
4. U.S. government officials, including State Department and Embassy representatives, should speak out strongly and unequivocally against all political violence and attacks by Islamist

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<sup>11</sup> Terrorism Designations FAQs, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/219520.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Ineligibilities and Waivers: Laws, Bureau of Consular Affairs -- U.S. Department of State, <http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/general/ineligibilities.html>.

groups, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, on religious minorities and atheists. U.S. officials should further work constructively with the current Government of Bangladesh to ensure that attacks on religious minorities and atheists cease, rehabilitate past victims of violence, and bring to swift justice those political and radical religious elements that have led the assault on minorities.

5. The U.S. should condition all future economic and military aid to Bangladesh only after robust monitoring by the State Department and Congress indicates improved conditions for religious and ethnic minorities. The U.S. should encourage Bangladesh to induct more religious minority community members in government administrative and military services, particularly at the officer level, as a specific condition for aid.