

## Bangladesh: Sinking into Chaos?

As violence from Islamic extremists increases, Bangladesh's weak governance threatens to undermine the country's social and economic progress. Coordinated bombings across the country, apparently the work of the banned Islamic fundamentalist group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) on August 17, 2005, showed the government's inability to deal with the growing threat from Islamic militants. Violent incidents, including bombings targeting government buildings and public spaces, attacks on opposition party rallies, and attempts to assassinate influential members of Bangladesh's society, have accelerated since then. Though the Bangladeshi government has continuously downplayed the extremist angle, it has banned four organizations, including the JMB. Without a much more vigorous response, the combination of a small but vocal extremist minority and weak governance could create another resting place for terrorists.

**Economy vulnerable to rising violence:** Bangladesh made significant gains in education and health in the past decade, but it remains one of the poorest countries in the world with gross national income per capita of about \$360 a year. Despite the success of exemplary programs such as the Grameen Bank, a micro-credit program that has benefited hundreds of thousands of low-income women, the unemployment rate remains desperately high—estimates run as high as 40 percent—and almost half the country lives below the poverty line. The literacy rate for the whole population is 43 percent, up from 34 percent two decades ago. Chronic corruption is a major source of frustration for investors. In Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index Report, Bangladesh, for the third year in a row, was ranked the most corrupt among the 158 rated countries.

Agriculture employs about two-thirds of the labor force and accounts for 35 percent of total GDP. Bangladeshi exports of ready-made garments have taken a beating with the end of quotas in their major export markets. Jute and jute products, tea, and fish are other major sources of foreign exchange, and dependence on those products makes Bangladesh vulnerable to natural disasters and fluctuating world commodity prices. The good news is that the Bangladesh economy has grown an annual 5.1 percent in the past decade. Between 1991 and

2000, the incidence of poverty fell from 59 to 50 percent, one of the fastest rates of decline worldwide. In 2003, for the first time, the United Nations Development Program put Bangladesh in the medium development league, along with India and Sri Lanka.

The bad news is the rising tide of political violence, Islamist fundamentalist groups, bickering between the two main political parties—the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League (AL)—and personal animosity between the respective leaders, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. This has shifted the focus of domestic and international policymakers from economic development to maintaining basic law and order in the country.

**Rising violence:** On August 17, approximately 459 time bombs exploded in 63 of the country's 64 districts within 30 minutes. This was by far the largest coordinated act of political violence anyone can remember in Bangladesh. Targets included government buildings, courts and press clubs. The bombs were no more than detonators, without explosive charges. Only two people were killed, but more than 140 were injured. One bomb exploded at the airport within a couple of hours of the prime minister's departure on an international trip. In leaflets found near the explosions, JMB called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Bangladesh. This operation shocked the government and the public. It was remarkable both for the breadth of organization it demonstrated and for the discipline of those who carried it out. In a country famous for its open flow of information, the authorities apparently had no advance warning.



Despite a major law enforcement effort since then, bombings have continued. Explosions in widely dispersed parts of the country, several times a week for the past month, have targeted government offices, courts, and judges. The geographic reach of the August 17 bombings has not been replicated, but the more recent explosions have been deadlier, and several have been the work of would-be suicide bombers. Press reports suggest that a plot to bomb an opposition

political meeting was foiled; these stories called to mind the deadly bombing of an Awami League meeting in August 2004. Lawyers and transport workers have taken out protest strikes.

**The fundamentalist presence:** The prevailing form of Islam in Bangladesh is nonviolent and tolerant, with a strong mystical tradition, but it has been apparent for several years that a few more-extreme organizations were having a significant impact. According to the Bangladeshi Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training, between 1991 and 2000 over 250,000 Bangladeshis left the country to find work abroad, mostly in the Middle East. Some returned influenced by extreme and intolerant forms of Islam, such as *Wahhabism*, and set up *Qawmi madrassas* oriented toward militancy.

Media reports indicate that over 30 Islamic militant organizations now operate in Bangladesh, hoping to introduce Sharia law and turn Bangladesh into an Islamic state. Some of these groups claim to share the same ideals as the former Taliban government in Afghanistan. Most have international connections and receive funding from organizations in the Middle East. Reports indicate that one of the parties, the Harakat-al-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), has received financial assistance from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan through various Islamic nongovernmental organizations. Some of the top-ranking officials of these groups are battle-hardened militants who have fought in wars in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Palestine. These groups are highly organized and maintain close contact amongst each other. This serves as a foundation from which they have been able to carry out their violent activities in very precisely coordinated and organized ways.

Prime Minister Zia, in a speech to the Ulema (Islamic scholars) on September 6, 2003, stated, "There [are] no fundamentalists or zealots in this country." While responding to the August 17 bombings, Moudud Ahmed, the law minister, said it was inconceivable that the militant group could have organized the blasts alone; the implication was that some foreign force was involved, and in the Bangladeshi environment this would be read as an indirect reference to India. The government has rounded up over 400 militants linked to the August 17 bombings. It has also arrested Mufti Hanan, the person believed responsible for the attempted assassination of opposition leader and former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2004. He is being questioned about a possible role in the August 17 bombings. However, the government has not arrested Abdur Rehman, the main leader of the JMB, which claimed responsibility for the recent bombings, nor Siddiqul Islam, known as Bangla Bhai, of the closely related Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). The government has also banned four militant Islamic organizations, including the JMB and the JMJB.

The effectiveness of this action is impaired by the lack of public trust in the police force, widely regarded as politicized and corrupt. The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a recently created paramilitary force, has had some effect in decreasing petty crime. But law and order at the district level has become increasingly tied in with party politics.

**The political cauldron:** The country faces an election before the end of 2006, and political competition has always been a take-no-prisoners affair. The BNP's four-party coalition government includes one Islamic party, the *Jamaat-e-Islami*,

and has been trying to develop links to another, the *Islami Oikya Jote* (IOJ), long associated with the government-regulated *madrassas*. BNP strategists see the *Jamaat* as essential to their reelection bid. They are acutely aware that the incumbent party has lost in the past two elections, and want to break that precedent. This undoubtedly makes a real crackdown on other Islamic organizations distasteful to the government. On the other hand, observers friendly



Photo Credit: U.S. Department of State.

to the government cite reports that the Awami League or even India may be behind the bombings. The Awami League has been trying to neutralize the government's "Islamic advantage." And both parties, as well as the Islamic groups, have a long history of using "student leaders" as shock troops for their political competition.

**Implications for the United States:** Bangladeshi officials deny that their country is becoming a safe haven for members of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization. In a speech on October 11, 2005, at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., the foreign secretary of Bangladesh, Hemayet Uddin, flatly stated, "Extremism is alien [to Bangladesh]."

Outsiders, however, are more concerned. They see the recent bombings as a clear indication that extremists are able to operate with some sophistication in Bangladesh and that they have considerable organizational capacity. A vocal extremist minority among Bangladeshi Muslims is a potential threat to security both in Bangladesh and outside its borders. India in particular is concerned about terrorism flowing into its territory, including the troubled multiethnic Northeastern

region. Bangladesh is also important as a moderate Muslim country with a large profile in international peacekeeping operations. The U.S. administration has made clear the importance the United States attaches to governmental reform and has publicly cited trade liberalization, economic diversification, and legal reform as requirements in the fight against terrorism.

Bangladesh's biggest problem is poor governance, which undermines the legitimacy of the political process, promotes lawlessness and corruption, and stifles economic growth and social development. Combined with religious extremism, this makes for a dangerous mix. Improving governance should be a major focus of Bangladesh's foreign aid donors—and especially the U.S. government.

— *Divyesh Lalloobhai & Pramit Mitra*

**Note to our readers:** This December 15, 2005, issue of the *South Asia Monitor* is being published early. We wish our readers a happy holiday season and new year. Our next issue will appear on February 1, 2006.

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