



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (30/2006)

*IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.*

---

## **Bangladesh: The Quagmire of Conflicting Nationalisms**

Swati Parashar\*

28 April 2006

BANGLADESH celebrated its 36th Independence Day on March 26, 2006, with the political leadership renewing its commitment to fight religious extremism and terrorism. However, uneasiness and speculation is rife about the future of this country. With the third largest Muslim population in the world and a volatile democratic system, Bangladesh has been rendered vulnerable to the growing tide of religious radicalism. The international community, and Bangladeshis in general, heaved a sigh of relief in early March 2006 when two key militants were arrested, but religious fundamentalism continues to threaten the Bangladeshi society and polity.

The rise of Islamic forces in Bangladesh, who advocate theocratic religious universalism and the creation of an Islamic state in Bangladesh, should not be seen as an abrupt development. The interplay between religion and politics in Bangladesh has a long history and religion has always been susceptible to politicisation.

### **Response to Growing Islamisation**

The organised radical groups like the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami, Bangladesh (HuJI-B), who aim to replace the parliamentary democracy with an 'Islamic Shariah State', pose the greatest challenge in this fluid situation. However, they are only the sharp end of the wedge that includes the leading political parties, foreign-linked charities and NGO's and the external environment, all of which are contributing to a significant increase in religious radicalism.

The two most prominent political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL), have both exploited a religious identity when it suits their political objectives. Though once avowedly secularist when in the opposition, the AL has repeatedly accused the present government of the BNP, led by Begum Khalida Zia, of forging an unholy alliance with radical Islamic groups like the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ). But the AL too has had to accept the importance of religion in the cultural ethos of Bangladesh, and adjust accordingly. The AL has begun to more publicly adopt religious symbols and practices in their activities. Party meetings have included Islamic religious proclamations. The AL leader, Sheikh Hasina, with all her secular legacy, began to carry prayer beads and also wore the headscarf. All of this could be designed to attract an electorate who are becoming increasingly comfortable with an Islamic identity.

The BNP has always been drawn towards religious forces. The last five years of the

BNP regime has witnessed increased militant activities including targeted killings of opposition leaders, violence against religious minorities, and terrorist attacks against the 'secular' personalities and institutions who oppose the creation of an Islamic state. The BNP government relented to mounting pressure in early March 2006 when it arrested two major militant figures, Siddikul Islam Bangla Bhai and Sheikh Abdur Rahman of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh. The arrests have done nothing to the aspirations of the BNP's allies like the Islami Oikyo Jote and the Jamaat who continue to agitate for an Islamic state.

The Jamaat-e-Islami is a political group whose main aim is to establish an Islamic Bangladesh. It has two ministers in the present BNP government and some of its members have been linked to the radical groups like the JMB and the HuJI-B. The Jamaat also has a student wing, the Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS) to promote its radical ideas among the youth. The IOJ is also a political party with religious overtones. It has two seats in the current parliament and is a supporter of the BNP government, though it does not enjoy ministerial portfolios.

Among the radical militant groups, the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) has been of particular concern. The JMB came to light when it claimed responsibility for the August 17, 2005 serial bombings in 63 out of 64 districts of Bangladesh. Almost 500 small but nearly simultaneous explosions killed at least two people and injured 125 people. Proscribed by the Bangladesh government in February 2005, the JMB claimed responsibility for these blasts and leaflets bearing the group's message were found near many of the homemade bombs. The group aims to establish an Islamic state and replace the current secular laws with the Shariah laws. The JMB (Party of the Mujahideen) seeks to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh through armed struggle alone.

Apart from the JMB, the other militant group that has drawn considerable attention is the HuJI-B. It cooperates with the Pakistan-based HuJI, and seeks to establish an 'Islamic Hukumat' (Islamic Government) in Bangladesh. It has carried out an extensive recruitment campaign among madrasa students and is believed to be working closely with groups in Pakistan and Kashmir. In its most daring attack, the HuJI has been accused of the recent bombings in the Indian city of Varanasi (March 2006), which claimed 26 lives at a temple and the local railway station.

### **Transnational Groups**

Bangladesh is also the logistical hub of transnational groups like the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) of Myanmar's Arakan state. Radical groups based in Pakistan and parts of Kashmir, like the HuJI and the Lashkar-e-Toiba, have established operational bases in Bangladesh and a number of jihadi terrorists have entered India via Bangladesh. Recent terrorist attacks in Delhi, Bangalore and Varanasi have all revealed that Bangladesh is an important link in the Islamist terrorist network in South Asia.

The political parties and terrorist groups are aided by funds received from some NGO's and charities in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. A Daily Star report on March 28, 2006 alleged that despite an embargo on its funds due to alleged terror links, the Kuwait-based NGO Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) is using bank accounts to run official work without the government's knowledge. The RIHS has

allegedly provided funds to several radical outfits including the JMB.

### **Strategic Location of Bangladesh**

The geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh as the buffer state between South and Southeast Asia serves to highlight the dire consequences of international neglect of this country. Many analysts believe President Bush missed an important opportunity to show solidarity with Bangladesh in its fight against extremism, when he failed to mention it during his recent trip to South Asia, India and Pakistan in March this year. An unstable Bangladesh would not only pose a threat to the regional powers like India and China but could also contribute to religious extremism and terrorist violence in South and Southeast Asia.

With general elections due in January 2007, the international community needs to ensure that Bangladesh remains an example of participatory democracy in the Islamic world. A constructive engagement with Bangladesh by the regional and Western powers must be emphasised. As its immediate neighbour and an aspiring global power, India has a special role to play in this regard.

The state itself has to respond to the increasing religiosity of its population, without granting excessive power to extremists. It is not surprising that there would be oscillations between secularism and fundamentalism in such a new state. The key is for the government to manage these to prevent violence. Thirty-six years is perhaps a very short time in the life of a nation-state to resolve issues as profound as identity. But Bangladesh is resting on the precipitous perch between reaching democratic stability, and fundamentalists-inspired anarchy. For Bangladesh, the challenge is to bring about change that is conducive to its growth and stability.

---

\* Swati Parashar is a Visiting Research Analyst with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University