

BERTIL LINTNER

Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh

When East Pakistan broke away from the main western part of the country to form Bangladesh in 1971, it was in opposition to the notion that all Muslim areas of former British India should unite in one state. The Awami League, which led the struggle for independence, grew out of the Bangla language movement and was based on Bengali nationalism, not religion. At the same time, independent, secular Bangladesh became the only country in the subcontinent with one dominant language group and very few ethnic and religious minorities.

It is important to remember that a Muslim element has always been present; otherwise what was East Pakistan could have merged with the predominantly Hindu Indian state of West Bengal, where the same language is spoken. The importance of Islam grew as the Awami League fell out with the country's powerful military, which began to use religion as a counterweight to the League's secular, vaguely socialist policies. (Many hard-line socialists, however, were opposed to the idea of a separate Bengali state in Bangladesh, which they branded as "bourgeois nationalism.") The late Bangladeshi

scholar Muhammad Ghulam Kabir argued that Maj. Gen. Zia ur-Rahman, who seized power in the mid-1970s, “successfully changed the image of Bangladesh from a liberal Muslim country to an Islamic country.”¹ M.G. Kabir also points out that “secularism” is a hazy and often misunderstood concept in Bangladesh. The Bengali term for it is *dharma mirapekshata*, which literally translates to “religious neutrality.” Thus, the word “secularism” in a Bangladeshi context has a subtle difference in meaning from its use in the West.²

In 1977, Zia dropped secularism as one of the four cornerstones of Bangladesh’s constitution (the other three were democracy, nationalism, and socialism, although no socialist economic system was ever introduced) and made the recitation of verses from the Quran a regular practice at meetings with his newly formed political organization, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which became the second-largest party in the country after the Awami League. The marriage of convenience between the military—which needed popular appeal and an ideological platform to justify its opposition to the Awami League—and the country’s Islamic forces survived Zia’s assassination in 1981.

In some respects, it grew even stronger under the rule of Lt. Gen. Hossain Muhammed Ershad (1982–90). In 1988, Ershad made Islam the state religion of Bangladesh, thus institutionalizing the new brand of nationalism with an Islamic flavor introduced by Zia. Ershad also changed the weekly holiday from Sunday to Friday, and revived the Jamaat-i-Islami to counter secular opposition. The Jamaat had supported Pakistan against the Bengali nationalists during the liberation war, and most of its leaders had fled to (West) Pakistan after 1971. Under Zia, they came back and brought with them new, fundamentalist ideas. Under Ershad, Islam became a political factor to be reckoned with.

Ershad was deposed in December 1990 following anti-government protests and was later convicted of a number of offences and jailed. But this did not lead to a return to old secular practices. Zia’s widow and the new leader of the BNP, Khaleda Zia, became prime minister after a general election in February 1991. This was a time when the

1. Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism: The Case of Bangladesh* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1994), 201.

2. *Ibid.*, 189.

Islamic forces consolidated their influence in Bangladesh, but it came to a halt when the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujib ur-Rahman, won the 1996 election. Five years later, an electoral four-party alliance led by Khaleda Zia's BNP came to power—and the new coalition that took over included for the first time two ministers from the Jamaat, which had emerged as the third-largest party, capturing seventeen seats in the three hundred-strong parliament.

The BNP rode on a wave of dissatisfaction with the Awami League, which many perceived as corrupt, but the four-party alliance was able to win a massive majority—191 seats for the BNP and 23 seats for its three allies—only because of the British-style system with one winner per constituency, and the alliance members all voted for each other. The Awami League remains the single biggest political party in Bangladesh with 40 percent of the popular vote, but it secured only 62 seats, or 20.66 percent of the members of parliament (MPs) in the election (it now has 58 seats because four were relinquished due to election of MPs from more than one seat).³

Expectations were high for the new government, which many hoped would be “cleaner” than the previous one. In June 2001, the Berlin-based organization Transparency International had in its annual report ranked Bangladesh the world's most corrupt country.⁴ But since the new government took over in October 2001, very little has changed in that regard. Further, violence has become widespread and much of it appears to be religiously and politically motivated. The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), a well-respected Bangladeshi non-governmental organization (NGO), quotes a local report that says non-Muslim minorities have suffered as a result: “The intimidation of the minorities, which had begun before the election, became worse afterwards.”⁵ Amnesty International reported in December 2001 that Hindus—who now make up less than 10 percent of Bangladesh's population of 130 million—in particular have come under attack. Hindu places of worship have been

3. *The Eighth Parliamentary Elections 2001* (Dhaka: Society for Environment and Human Development for Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh, March 2002), 2.

4. <http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2001/cip2001.html>.

5. *Eighth Parliamentary Elections 2001*, 161.

ransacked, villages destroyed and scores of Hindu women are reported to have been raped.⁶

While the Jamaat may not be directly behind these attacks, its inclusion in the government has meant that more radical groups feel they now enjoy protection from the authorities and can act with impunity. The most militant group, the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI, or the Movement of Islamic Holy War), is reported to have fifteen thousand members. Bangladeshi Hindus and moderate Muslims hold HUJI responsible for many of the recent attacks against religious minorities, secular intellectuals and journalists. In a statement released by the U.S. State Department on May 21, 2002, HUJI is described as a terrorist organization with ties to Islamic militants in Pakistan.⁷

While Bangladesh is yet far from becoming another Pakistan, Islamic forces are no doubt on the rise, and extremist influence is growing, especially in the countryside. According to a foreign diplomat in Dhaka, “in the 1960s and 1970s, it was the leftists who were seen as incorruptible purists. Today, the role model for many young men in rural areas is the dedicated Islamic cleric with his skull cap, flowing robes and beard.”⁸

The Return of the Jamaat-i-Islami

THE IDEA THAT the Muslim-dominated parts of British India should become a separate country was articulated for the first time in a short essay written in 1933 by Rahmat Ali, an Indian Muslim student at Cambridge. He even proposed a name for the new state—Pakistan—which was an acronym based on the nations that would compose it: the Punjab, Afghan (the Northwest Frontier), Kashmir, Indus (or Sindh) and BaluchiSTAN. The new name also meant “the Land of the Pure.”

However, the acronym did not include India’s most populous Muslim province, East Bengal, and, at first, most Islamic groups opposed the idea of religious nationalism. The most prestigious

6. Amnesty International, *Bangladesh: Attacks on Members of the Hindu Majority* (Amnesty International, December 2001).

7. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001* (Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 21 May 2002).

8. Bertil Lintner, “Is Religious Extremism on the Rise in Bangladesh?” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, May 2002.

Islamic university in the subcontinent, the Dar-ul-Ulum, was located at Deoband in Saharanpur district of what now is Uttar Pradesh in India, and its leaders strongly supported the Indian nationalist movement led by the Congress. The Jamaat-i-Islami, which was founded in 1941 by Maulana Abul Ala Maududi and had grown out of the Deoband Madrassa (as the university became known), went to the extent of “alleging that the demand for a separate state based on modern selfish nationalism amounted to rebelling against the tenets of Islam.”⁹

But gradually, the Muslim League, led by Muhammed Ali Jinnah, won support for the Pakistan idea, and when India became independent in August 1947, two states were born: the secular but Hindu-dominated Union of India—and the Islamic state of Pakistan, which consisted of two parts, one to the west of India and the other to the east. The Jamaat became one of the strongest supporters of the Pakistan idea, and, somewhat ironically, the Deobandi movement through its network of religious schools, or madrassas, developed into a breeding ground for Pakistan-centered Islamic fundamentalism. Over the years, the Deobandi brand of Islam has become almost synonymous with religious extremism and fanaticism.

The Deobandis had actually arisen in British India not as a reactionary force but as a forward-looking movement to unite and reform Muslim society in the wake of oppression the community faced after the 1857 revolt, or “Mutiny” as the British called it.¹⁰ But in independent Pakistan—East and West—new Deobandi madrassas were set up everywhere and were run by semi-educated mullahs who, according to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, “were far removed from the original reformist agenda of the Deobandi school.”¹¹ Much later, it was from these madrassas that Afghanistan’s dreaded Taliban (“Islamic students”) were to emerge.

The Jamaat was from the beginning inspired by the Ikhwan ul-Muslimeen, or the Muslim Brotherhood, which was set up in Egypt in 1928 with the aim of bringing about an Islamic revolution and creating an Islamic state.¹² When they had come to accept Pakistan as

9. Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism*, 99.

10. For an excellent account of the rise of the Deobandis, see Salahuddin Babar, “Rise of the Right,” *Probe Newsmagazine* (Bangladesh), 1–15 March 2002.

11. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (London: Pan Books, 2001), 89.

12. *Ibid.*, 86.

that Islamic state, Bengali nationalism was totally unacceptable. The Jamaat's militants fought alongside the Pakistan army against the Bengali nationalists. Among the most notorious of the Jamaat leaders was Abdul Kader Molla, who became known as "the Butcher of Mirpur" (a Dhaka suburb that in 1971 was populated mainly by non-Bengali Muslim immigrants).¹³ Today, Molla is the publicity secretary of Bangladeshi Jamaat and, despite his background, was granted a U.S. visa to visit New York in the last week of June 2002. In 1971, Molla and other Jamaat leaders were considered war criminals by the first government of independent Bangladesh, but they were never prosecuted as they had fled to Pakistan.

The leaders of the Jamaat returned to Bangladesh during the rule of Zia and Ershad because they were invited to come back, and they also saw Ershad especially as a champion of their cause. This was somewhat ironic as Ershad was—and still is—known as a playboy and hardly a religiously minded person. But he had introduced a string of Islamic reforms—and he needed the Jamaat to counter the Awami League and, like his predecessor Zia, he had to find ideological underpinnings for what was basically a military dictatorship. The problem was that the Jamaat had been discredited by its role in the liberation war—but, as a new generation emerged, that could be "corrected." Jamaat's Islamic ideals were taught in Bangladesh's madrassas, which multiplied at a tremendous pace.

The madrassas fill an important function in an impoverished country such as Bangladesh, where basic education is available only to a few. Today, there are an estimated sixty-four thousand madrassas in Bangladesh, divided into two kinds. The Aliya madrassas are run with government support and control, while the or Deoband-style madrassas are totally independent. Aliya students study for fifteen to sixteen years and are taught Arabic, religious theory and other Islamic subjects as well as English, mathematics, science and history. They prepare themselves for employment in government service or for jobs in the private sector, similar to any other college or university student. In 1999, there were 7,122 such registered madrassas in Bangladesh.¹⁴

The much more numerous Deobandi madrassas are more "traditional"; Islamic studies dominate, and the students are taught Urdu

13. Ahmed Salim, "Murders Most Foul," *Newsline* (Pakistan), 29 November 2000.

14. Babar, "Rise of the Right."

(the national language of Pakistan), Persian and Arabic. After finishing their education, the students are incapable of taking up any mainstream profession, and the mosques and the madrassas are their main sources of employment. As Bangladeshi journalist Salahuddin Babar points out, “passing out from the madrassas, poorly equipped to enter mainstream life and professions, the students are easily lured by motivated quarters who capitalize on religious sentiment to create fanatics, rather than modern Muslims.”¹⁵

The consequences of this kind of madrasa education can be seen in the growth of the Jamaat. It did not fare well in the 1996 election, capturing only three seats in the parliament and 8.61 percent of the votes.¹⁶ Its election manifesto was also quite carefully worded, perhaps taking into consideration the party’s reputation and the fact that the vast majority of Bangladeshis remain opposed to Sharia law and other extreme Islamic practices. The twenty-three-page document devoted eighteen pages to lofty election promises, and only five to explaining Jamaat’s political stand. The party tried to reassure the public that it would not advocate chopping off thieves’ hands, the stoning of people who had committed adultery, or banning interest—at least not immediately. According to SEHD: “The priority focus would be alleviation of poverty, stopping free mixing of sexes and thus awakening the people to the spirit of Islam and then eventually step by step the Islamic laws would be introduced.”¹⁷

It is impossible to determine how much support the Jamaat actually had in the 2001 election, as it was part of an alliance whose various members voted for each other against the Awami League, but its seventeen seats in the new parliament—and two ministers in the government—suggest a dramatic increase. Its youth organization, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), is especially active. It is a member of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations as well as the World Assembly of Muslim Youth and has close contacts with other radical Muslim groups in Pakistan, the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia. One of its main strongholds is at the university in Chittagong, and it dominates the Deobandi madrassas all over the

15. Ibid.

16. Society for Environment and Human Development, *The Reporter’s Guide: Handbook on Election Reporting* (Dhaka: Society for Environment and Human Development, 2001), 101.

17. Ibid.

country, from where it draws most of its new members. The ICS has been implicated in a number of bombings and politically and religiously motivated assassinations.

On April 7, 2001, two leaders of the Awami League's youth and student front were killed by ICS activists and on June 15, an estimated twenty-one people were killed and more than one hundred injured in a bomb blast at the Awami League party office in the town of Narayanganj. Two weeks later, the police arrested an ICS activist for his alleged involvement in the blast.¹⁸ A youngish Islamic militant, Nurul Islam Bulbul, is the ICS's current president, and Muhammed Nazrul Islam its general secretary.

For many years the mother party, the Jamaat, was led by Gholam Azam, who had returned from Pakistan when Zia was still alive and in power. He resigned in December 2000, and Motiur Rahman Nizami took over as the new *amir* of the party amid wide protests and demands that he be put on trial for war crimes he committed during the liberation war as the head of a notorious paramilitary force, the al-Badr. In one particular incident on December 3, 1971, some members of that force seized the village of Bishalikkha at night in search of freedom fighters, beating many and killing eight people. When Nizami's appointment was made public, veterans of the liberation war burnt an effigy of him during a public rally.¹⁹ In October 2001, Nizami was appointed minister for agriculture, an important post in a mainly agricultural country such as Bangladesh. His deputy, Ali Ahsan Muhammed Mujahid, became minister for social welfare.

The terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001 occurred during the election campaign in Bangladesh, when the country was ruled by a caretaker government. The outgoing prime minister, the Awami League's Sheikh Hasina and then opposition leader Khaleda Zia of the BNP, condemned the attacks and both, if they were elected, offered the United States use of Bangladesh's air space, ports and other facilities to launch military attacks against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Many Bangladeshis were moved by the loss of as many as fifty of their countrymen in the attacks on the World

18. "Bangladesh Assessment 2002," *Southeast Asia Terrorism Portal* (Indian website, 2001); www.satp.org

19. *Bangladesh Broadcasting Service*, 8 December 2000.

Trade Center. While some of them were immigrants working as computer analysts and engineers, most seem to have been waiters at the Window on the World restaurant who were working hard to send money back to poor relatives in Bangladesh. A Bangladeshi embassy official in Washington branded the attacks “an affront to Islam ... an attack on humanity.”²⁰

Jamaat’s stand on the “war against terrorism,” however, contrasts sharply to that of the more established parties. Shortly after the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan began in October 2001, the Jamaat created a fund purportedly for “helping the innocent victims of America’s war.” According to the Jamaat’s own announcements, 12 million Bangladeshi taka (\$210,000) was raised before the effort was discontinued in March 2002. Any remaining funds, the Jamaat then said, would go to Afghan refugees in camps in Pakistan.²¹

The Rise of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami and Other Extremist Groups

THE GROWTH OF THE JAMAAT during the Ershad regime paved the way for the establishment of even more radical groups when the BNP returned to power in 1991. According to Bangladeshi journalists, in the early 1990s Bangladeshi diplomats in Saudi Arabia issued passports to Pakistani militants in the kingdom to enable them to escape to Bangladesh.²² Other extremists from Pakistan—and perhaps also Afghanistan—appear to have been able to enter Bangladesh in the same way during that period.

These men were instrumental in building up HUJI, which was first formed in 1992, reportedly with funds from Osama bin Laden.²³ The existence of firm links between the new Bangladeshi militants and al-Qaeda was proven when Fazlul Rahman, leader of the “Jihad Movement in Bangladesh” (to which HUJI belongs), signed the official declaration of “holy war” against the United States on February 23, 1998. Other signatories included bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri (leader of the Jihad Group in Egypt), Rifa’i Ahmad Taha (aka Abu-

20. <http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/01100321.htm>.

21. *Holiday* (Bangladesh), 8 March 2002.

22. Communication with a Bangladeshi journalist who has requested anonymity, April 2002.

23. *Southasia Terrorism Portal*, www.satp.org.

Yasir, Egyptian Islamic Group), and Sheikh Mir Hamzah (secretary of the Jamiat Ulema Pakistan).²⁴

HUJI is headed by Shawkat Osman (aka Maulana or Sheikh Farid) in Chittagong and, according to the U.S. State Department, has “at least six camps” in Bangladesh.²⁵ Similar to the ICS, HUJI draws most of its members from the country’s Deobandi madrassas and has shown it is capable of extreme violence. Bangladesh’s Islamic radicals first came to international attention in 1993 when author Taslima Nasrin was forced to flee the country after receiving death threats. The fundamentalists objected to her critical writings about what she termed outdated religious beliefs. Extremist groups offered a \$5,000 reward for her death. She now lives in exile in France.

While Nasrin’s outspoken, feminist writings caused controversy even among moderate Bangladeshi Muslims, the entire state was shocked when, in early 1999, three men attempted to kill Shams ur-Rahman, a well-known poet and symbol of Bangladesh’s secular nationhood. During the ensuing arrests, the police said they seized a list of several intellectuals and writers, including Nasrin, whom Bangladeshi religious extremists had branded “enemies of Islam.”²⁶

Bangladeshi human rights organizations openly accuse HUJI of being behind both the death threats against Nasrin and the attempt to kill Rahman. The U.S. State Department notes that HUJI has been accused of stabbing a senior Bangladeshi journalist in November 2000 for making a documentary on the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh, and the July 2000 assassination attempt of then prime minister Sheikh Hasina.²⁷

As with the Jamaat and the ICS, HUJI’s main stronghold is in the lawless southeast, which includes the border with Burma. With its fluid population and weak law enforcement, the region has long been a haven for smugglers, gunrunners, pirates, and ethnic insurgents

24. See ERFI *Daily Intelligence* report, ERFI Risk Assessment Service, vol. 4 (11 June 1998), 162. The full text of the 1998 *fatwah* is also available on <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/fatwah.htm> and <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>.

25. Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*.

26. Turkaya Atav, *Kashmir and Neighbours: Tale, Terror, Truce* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), 150.

27. Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*.

from across the Burmese border. The past decade has seen a massive influx of weapons, especially small arms, through the fishing port of Cox's Bazaar, which has made the situation in the southeast even more dangerous and volatile.²⁸

The winner in the 2001 election in one of the constituencies in Cox's Bazaar, BNP candidate Shahjahan Chowdhury, was said to be supported by "the man allegedly leading smuggling operations in [the border town of] Teknaf." Instead of the regular army, the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles were deployed in this constituency to help the police in their electoral peacekeeping. This was, according to SEHD, "criticized by the local people who alleged that the Bangladesh Rifles were well connected with the smuggling activities and thus could take partisan roles."²⁹

In one of the most recent high-profile attacks in the area, Gopal Krishna Muhuri, the sixty-year-old principal of Nazirhat College in Chittagong and a leading secular humanist, was gunned down in November 2001 in his home by four hired assassins who belonged to a gang patronized by the Jamaat.³⁰ India, which is viewing the growth of Bangladesh's Islamic movements with deep concern, has linked HUJI militants to the attack on the American Center in Kolkata (Calcutta) in January 2002, and a series of bomb blasts in the state of Assam in mid-1999.³¹

On May 10–11, 2002, nine Islamic fundamentalist groups, including HUJI, met at a camp near the small town of Ukhia south of Cox's Bazaar and formed the Bangladesh Islamic Manch (Association). The new umbrella organization also includes one purporting to represent the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority in Burma, and the Muslim Liberation Tigers of Assam, a small group operating in India's Northeast. By June, Bangladeshi veterans of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s were reported to be training members of the new alliance in at least two camps in southern Bangladesh.³²

28. *Small Arms Survey 2001: Profiling the Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2001), 181.

29. *Eighth Parliamentary Elections 2001*, 99.

30. Amnesty International, *Bangladesh: Attacks on Hindu Majority*.

31. *The Hindu*, 23 January 2002. See also Subir Bhaumik, "The Second Front of Islamic Terror in South Asia" (paper presented at an international seminar on terrorism and low-intensity conflict, Jadvpur University, Kolkata, 6–8 March 2002).

32. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 July 2002.

The Plight of the Rohingyas

THE ARAKAN AREA OF BURMA was separated from the rest of the country by a densely forested mountain range, which made it possible for the Arakanese—most of whom are Buddhist—to maintain their independence until the late eighteenth century. Contacts with the outside world had until then been mostly with the West, which, in turn, had brought Islam to the region. The first Muslims on the Arakan coast were Moorish, Arab and Persian traders who arrived between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries. Some of them stayed and married local women. Their offspring became the forefathers of yet another hybrid race, which much later was to become known as the Rohingyas. Like the people in the Chittagong area, they speak a Bengali dialect interspersed with words borrowed from Persian, Urdu and Arakanese.³³

There is no evidence of friction between Rohingyas and their Buddhist neighbors in the earlier days. Indeed, after 1430 the Arakanese kings, though Buddhists, even used Muslim titles in addition to their own names and issued medallions bearing the *kalima*, or Muslim confession of faith.³⁴ Persian was the court language until the Burmese invasion in 1784. Burmese rule lasted until the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824–26, when Arakan was taken over by the British along with the Tenasserim region of southeastern Burma.

When Burma was a part of British India, the rich ricelands of Arakan attracted thousands of seasonal laborers, especially from the Chittagong area of adjacent East Bengal. Many of them found it convenient to stay since there was already a large Muslim population who spoke the same language and, at that time, there was no ill feeling toward immigrants from India proper—unlike the situation in other parts of Burma, where people of subcontinental origin were despised. At the same time, Buddhist Arakanese migrated to East Bengal and settled along the coast between Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar. The official border, the Naf River, united rather than separated the two British territories.

But the presence of a Muslim minority in Arakan became an issue after Burma's independence in 1948. The Buddhist and Muslim

33. For a comprehensive account of the Rohingyas and other Muslim communities in Burma, see Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972).

34. *Ibid.*, 19.

communities had become divided during World War Two; the Buddhists had rallied behind the Japanese while the Muslims had remained loyal to the British. Some Muslims, fearing reprisals from the Buddhists once the British were gone, rose up in arms, demanding an independent state, and the Burmese army was sent in to quell the rebellion. Predominantly Buddhist Burma never really recognized the Arakanese Muslims—who in the 1960s began to refer to themselves as “Rohingya,” a term of disputed origin—as one of the country’s “indigenous” ethnic groups. As such, and because of their different religion and physical appearance, Rohingyas have often become convenient scapegoats for Burma’s military government to rally the public against whenever that country has been hit by an economic or political crisis.

In March 1978, the Burmese government launched a campaign code-named *Naga Min* (Dragon King) in Arakan, ostensibly to “check illegal immigrants.” Hundreds of heavily armed troops raided Muslim neighborhoods in Sittwe (Akyab) and some five thousand people were arrested. As the operation was extended to other parts of Arakan, tens of thousands of Rohingyas crossed the border to Bangladesh. By the end of June, approximately two hundred thousand Rohingyas had fled, causing an international outcry.³⁵ Eventually, most of the refugees were allowed to return, but thousands found it safer to remain on the Bangladesh side of the border. Entire communities of “illegal immigrants” from Burma sprang up along the border south of Cox’s Bazaar, and a steady trickle of refugees from Burma continued to cross into Bangladesh throughout the 1980s.

The immensely wealthy Saudi Arabian charity Rabitat al Alam al Islami began sending aid to the Rohingya refugees during the 1978 crisis and also built a hospital and a madrassa at Ukhia, south of Cox’s Bazaar. Prior to these events, there was only one political organization among the Rohingyas on the Bangladesh-Burma border, the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), which was set up in 1974 by Muhammed Jafar Habib, a native of Buthidaung in Arakan and a graduate of Rangoon University. He made several appeals—most of them unsuccessful—to the international Islamic community for help, and maintained a camp for his small guerrilla army, which operated from the Bangladeshi side of the border.

35. For an account of the 1978 refugee crisis, see Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 317–18.

In the early 1980s, more radical elements among the Rohingyas broke away from the RPF to set up the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). Led by a medical doctor from Arakan, Muhammed Yunus, it soon became the main and most militant faction among the Rohingyas in Bangladesh and on the border. Given its more rigid religious stand, the RSO soon enjoyed support from like-minded groups in the Muslim world. These included Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami in Afghanistan, Hizbe-ul Mujahideen in Kashmir and Angkatan Belia Islam sa-Malaysia (ABIM), the Islamic Youth Organization of Malaysia. Afghan instructors were seen in some of the RSO camps along the Bangladesh-Burma border, while nearly one hundred RSO rebels were reported to be undergoing training in the Afghan province of Khost with Hizb-e-Islami Mujahideen.³⁶

The RSO's main military camp was located near the hospital that the Rabitat had built at Ukhia. At the time, the RSO acquired a substantial number of Chinese-made RPG-2 rocket launchers, light machine guns, AK-47 assault rifles, claymore mines and explosives from private arms dealers in the Thai town of Aranyaprathet near Thailand's border with Cambodia, which in the 1980s emerged as a major arms bazaar for guerrilla movements in the region. These weapons were siphoned off from Chinese arms shipments to the resistance battling the Vietnamese army in Cambodia, and sold to anyone who wanted—and could afford—to buy them.³⁷

The Bangladeshi media gave quite extensive coverage to the RSO buildup along the border, but it soon became clear that it was not only Rohingyas who underwent training in its camps. Many, it turned out, were members of ICS and came from the University of Chittagong, where a "campus war" was being fought between Islamic militants and more moderate student groups.³⁸ The RSO was, in fact, engaged in little or no fighting inside Burma.

There was also a more moderate faction among the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), which was set up in 1986, uniting the remnants of the old RPF and a handful of

36. Lintner, "Tension Mounts in Arakan State," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 19 October 1991. The story was based on interview with Rohingyas and others in the Cox's Bazaar area in 1991. I also visited a Rohingya army camp near the border with Burma.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Interviews and observations I made when I visited the border in 1991.

defectors from the RSO. It was led by Nurul Islam, a Rangoon-educated lawyer. But it never had more than a few dozen soldiers, mostly equipped with elderly, UK-made 9mm Sterling L2A3 sub-machine guns, bolt action .303 rifles and a few M-16 assault rifles.³⁹ In 1998, ARIF became the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), maintaining its moderate stance and barely surviving in exile in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar.

The expansion of the RSO in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the unprecedented publicity the group attracted in the local and international media, prompted the Burmese government to launch a massive counter-offensive to "clear up" the border area. In December 1991, Burmese troops crossed the border and attacked a Bangladeshi military outpost. The incident developed into a major crisis in Bangladesh-Burma relations, and by April 1992 more than 250,000 Rohingya civilians had been forced out of Arakan.

Hardly by coincidence, this second massive exodus of Rohingyas occurred at a time when Burma was engulfed in a major political crisis. The pro-democracy National League for Democracy (NLD) had won a landslide victory in a general election in May 1990, but the country's military government refused to convene the elected assembly. There were anti-government demonstrations in the northern city of Mandalay, and the ruling Burmese junta was condemned internationally.

The Rohingya refugees were housed in a string of makeshift camps south of Cox's Bazaar, prompting the Bangladeshi government to appeal for help from the international community. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) came in to run the camps and to negotiate with the Burmese government for the return of the Rohingyas. In April 1992, Prince Khaled Sultan Abdul Aziz, commander of the Saudi contingent in the 1991 Gulf War, visited Dhaka and recommended a Desert Storm-like action against Burma, "just what [the UN] did to liberate Kuwait."⁴⁰

That, of course, never happened, and the Burmese government, under pressure from the United Nations, eventually agreed to take most of the refugees back. But an estimated twenty thousand destitute

39. *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 19 October 1991.

40. For an account of the 1991–92 Rohingya refugee crisis, see Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 397–98.

refugees remain in two camps between Cox's Bazaar and the border. In addition, an undisclosed number of Rohingyas, perhaps as many as 100,000 to 150,000, continue to live outside the UNHCR-supervised camps. There is little doubt that extremist groups have taken advantage of the disenfranchised Rohingyas, including recruiting them as cannon fodder for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In an interview with the Karachi-based newspaper *Ummat* on September 28, 2001, bin Laden said, "there are areas in all parts of the world where strong jihadi forces are present, from Bosnia to Sudan, and from Burma to Kashmir."⁴¹ He was most probably referring to a small group of Rohingyas on the Bangladesh-Burma border.

Many of the Rohingya recruits were given the most dangerous task in the battlefield: clearing mines and pottering. According to Asian intelligence sources, Rohingya recruits were paid 30,000 Bangladeshi taka (\$525) on joining and then 10,000 taka (\$175) per month. The families of recruits killed in action were offered 100,000 taka (\$1,750).⁴² Recruits were taken mostly via Nepal to Pakistan, where they were trained and sent on to military camps in Afghanistan. It is not known how many people from this part of Bangladesh—Rohingyas and others—fought in Afghanistan, but it is believed to be quite substantial. Others went to Kashmir and even Chechnya to join forces with Islamic militants there.⁴³

In an interview with CNN in December 2001, American "taliban" fighter, John Walker Lindh related that the al-Qaeda-directed *ansar* (companions of the Prophet) brigades, to which he had belonged in Afghanistan, were divided along linguistic lines: "Bengali, Pakistani (Urdu) and Arabic," which suggests that the Bengali-speaking component—Bangladeshi and Rohingya—must have been significant.⁴⁴ In early 2002, Afghanistan's foreign minister, Dr. Abdullah, told a Western journalist that "we have captured one Malaysian and one or two supporters from Burma."⁴⁵

41. See also Jim Garamone, "Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda Network," *American Forces Press Service*, 21 September 2001: "Al-Qaeda has cells in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Dagestan, Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Uganda, Ethiopia, and in the West Bank and Gaza."

42. *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 2002.

43. Bhaumik, "The Second Front."

44. *Transcript of John Walker Interview*, CNN, 21 December 2001.

45. Lintner, "A Recipe for Trouble," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 April 2002. The comment was made to Michael Vatikiotis, editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

In January 2001, Bangladesh clamped down on Rohingya activists and offices in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar, most probably in an attempt to improve relations with Burma. Hundreds were rounded up, and the local press was full of reports of their alleged involvement in gun- and drug-running. Rohingya leaders vehemently deny such accusations and blame local Bangladeshi gangs with high-level connections for the violence in the area. But the Rohingyas were forced to evacuate their military camps, which had always been located on the Bangladesh side of the border. Recent reports from the area suggest that HUJI and other Bangladeshi Islamic groups have taken over these camps, with the main base being the one the RSO used to maintain near the Rabitat-built hospital in Ukhia.⁴⁶

Attacks on Secular Muslims and Religious Minorities

What now is Bangladesh—and initially East Bengal and then East Pakistan—has undergone dramatic demographic changes during the past sixty years. According to the 1941 Census of India, Hindus made up 28 percent of the population of then East Bengal. Twenty years later, when East Pakistan was well established, the number had decreased to 18.5 percent. More left during the liberation war in 1971, when the Pakistani army targeted Hindus specifically. By 1974, only 13.5 percent of the population of independent Bangladesh was Hindu. According to the latest estimate, the figure is now down to 9 percent.⁴⁷ At the same time, large numbers of Buddhists from the Chittagong Hill Tracts—Bangladesh's other main religious minority—have fled to India.

The fall of the Awami League and the murder of Mujib-ur Rahman in August 1975, followed by the military takeover by Maj. Gen. Zia in November of that year, ushered in a new era of Bangladeshi nationalism, where the religious and ethnic minorities had little or no place. Mujib's immediate successor, Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmed, who was a senior member of the Awami League but known for his Islamic and pro-Pakistan leanings, began to conclude his speeches with *Bangladesh Zindabad* (long live Bangladesh, but "zindabad" is a Persian word)

46. I visited the area, including Ukhia, in March 2002.

47. The figures are based on information from Bangladesh's Ministry of Planning, Bureau of Statistics. See also Jaideep Saikia, *Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh* (paper disseminated by bangladesherdak@yahoo.com, May 2002).

rather than the war cry of the liberation struggle, *Joi Bangla* (both words being Bengali). This soon became common practice in government announcements and radio broadcasts.

A shift in foreign policy was also noticeable. Bangladesh's first government had emphasized friendship with India and the Soviet Union. Zia's government steered Bangladesh closer to Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸ Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), became active in Bangladesh again, working closely with its local counterpart, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). Pakistan never fully recovered from the loss of East Pakistan, and never forgave India for the role it played in the birth of Bangladesh by sending troops to fight the Pakistani army.

The idea of Bangladesh rejoining Pakistan was out of the question after the extremely bloody liberation war, in which millions died. But Pakistan was determined to regain its influence over its former eastern part and, especially, to keep Indian influence there to an absolute minimum. Zia's policies, including allowing the Jamaat to return, served these interests, and the Pakistanis, quite naturally, emphasized the main bond that united the two countries: Islam.

Historian M.G. Kabir argues that Zia's propagation of a new brand of Bangladeshi nationalism was a scheme "to simultaneously consolidate feelings of nationhood, provide a series of symbols for unifying the country, contribute to the enthusiasm with which nation-building activities are pursued, and, ultimately maintain the identity and integrity of Bangladesh as a nation-state independent of India."⁴⁹ In a posthumously published article written by Zia, he lists seven factors that he considers to be the bases of Bangladeshi nationalism: territory, people irrespective of religion, Bengali language, culture, economic life, religion, and the legacy of the 1971 liberation war.⁵⁰ There is an obvious contradiction between "people irrespective of religion" and "religion," and that has since been the dilemma for Bangladesh's non-Muslim population. Ershad's declaration of Islam as the state religion made it clear that "religion" in a Bangladeshi context means Islam.

Bangladesh's Islamic identity has grown stronger over the years, and after the October 2001 election there has been a marked increase in

48. Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism*, 196–97.

49. *Ibid.*, 199.

50. *Ibid.*

the number of attacks on non-Muslim population groups. These attacks appear to have been prompted by a desire to build a real “nation-state,” free from minorities, and motivated by political revenge. Amnesty International reported in December 2001: “Hindus in Bangladesh have tended to vote for the Awami League. They have therefore been the target of a political backlash by supporters of parties opposing Awami League.” In Ziodhara, one of the worst affected villages, several hundred Hindu villagers left the area. In another village, Deuatala Bazaar, gangs of young men wielding sharp weapons reportedly went from door to door telling Hindus to “go away.”⁵¹ In Chandaikona Bazaar another youth gang damaged Hindu statues and looted the temple.⁵²

The Amnesty report continues: “Human rights organizations in Bangladesh believe over 100 women have been subjected to rape. Reports persistently allege that the perpetrators have been mainly members of the BNP and its coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami.”⁵³ As a result, thousands of Bangladeshi Hindus have fled to India, often leaving their belongings and land behind. The exact number of refugees is uncertain, as they tend to blend in with the largely Hindu population of the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura.

Other religious minorities have also been targeted. In December 2001, a Bangladeshi newspaper reported that young women from fifty Christian families in Natoore were living in fear of hoodlums who would roar past their huts on motorcycles at night. The hoodlums demanded ransom of 10,000 to 20,000 Bangladeshi taka (\$175–350) from men in the village—or their daughters. The villagers had also had their crops taken away after the October election.⁵⁴ In April 2002 a well-known Buddhist monk, Ganojyoti Mohasthobir, was murdered by a group of thugs who demanded he paid them “infidel protection tax.”⁵⁵

But moderate Muslims have also become victims. On November 22, 2001 prominent journalist and writer Shahriar Kabir was arrested at Dhaka International Airport on his return from Kolkata. He had

51. Amnesty International, *Bangladesh: Attacks on Hindu Majority*.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities, *Give Ransom or Girl, Order Hoodlums: 50 Christian Families of Natoore Subjugated by Nightmare*, 8 December 2001.

55. *The Daily Janakantha* (Bangladesh), 23 April 2002.

been to India to cover the plight of the Hindus who had fled persecution in Bangladesh and had his video tapes, film and camera confiscated by the police at the airport. He was held in custody for nineteen days before he was released on bail. In March 2002 two staff members of the NGO Proshika ("a Center for Human Development"), Omar Tarek Chawdhury and Ajhar-ul Hoque, were arrested on allegations that they had been in possession of "documents" relating to attacks against Hindus.⁵⁶

Their arrest came only weeks after the Danish and German ambassadors in Dhaka had asked the Bangladesh government to "take immediate steps to stop all sorts of repression and attacks on the country's religious and other minorities."⁵⁷ But there are no signs that this is about to happen. On the contrary, the future of the country's religious and ethnic minorities appears bleak, as "Bangladeshi nationalism" is becoming synonymous with a stronger Muslim identity, and Islamic groups are becoming increasingly fierce in their public statements and actions.

Conclusion

IN DECEMBER 2001 Maulana Ubaidul Haq, the *khatib* (cleric) of Bangladesh's national mosque, Baitul Mukarram, and a Jamaat associate publicly condemned the U.S. war on terror and urged followers to wage a holy war against the United States. "President Bush and America is the most heinous terrorist in the world. Both America and Bush must be destroyed. The Americans will be washed away if Bangladesh's 120 million Muslims spit on them," the cleric told a gathering of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi Muslims, which included several high-ranking officials in the new government that took over in October 2001.⁵⁸

Despite the virulent rhetoric, it is highly unlikely that Bangladesh's 120 million Muslims would spit on the Americans, or wage a holy war against anybody. Bangladesh's secular roots are holding, at least for the time being. But the country's Islamic extremists are becoming

56. Amnesty International, *Press release ASA 13/005/2002*, 15 March 2002.

57. News from Bangladesh, 8 March 2002. <http://www/bangladesh-web.com/news/mar/08/08032002.htm>.

58. *Muktadhara*, "a website for Bengalis," <http://members.tripod.com/scohel/page03.html>.

more vocal and daring in their attacks on “infidels,” a worrisome sign in what is basically a very tolerant society. And it is not the number of extremists that matters—even a small group can spread fear and terror—but how well organized and dedicated they are.

Bangladesh’s Islamic extremists are becoming better organized, as the May meeting at Ukhia of nine militant groups shows. The proliferation of small arms and an ensuing increase in violence of all kinds, especially in that part of the country, are also a growing concern. These factors have prompted the country’s donors, who met in Paris in March 2002, to tag aid to an improvement in the law and order situation. In mid-2001, the estimated number of illegal arms in Bangladesh was 250,000, of which only 5,481 were recovered during a crackdown in the lead-up to the general election in October 2001.⁵⁹ In early 2002, three leading local human rights groups in Bangladesh reported that a total of 258 people were murdered in March alone, of which thirty-nine were political killings. In the month of February, the number of murders was 336, including a journalist, according to the Institute of Democratic Watch, a Bangladeshi NGO.⁶⁰

A culture of violence, especially among the young, is emerging, and many young Islamic militants are now armed. The role of the madrasas in shaping the next generation of Bangladeshis also cannot be underestimated. By including the Jamaat in her cabinet, Khaleda Zia is playing with fire. On the other hand, Bangladesh remains heavily dependent on foreign aid and cannot afford to antagonize its most important donor countries, mainly Japan and the West. It should, therefore, be in the government’s interest to contain the spread of Islamic extremism. But so far, very little has been done to counter the propaganda and activities of the extremists, and Khaleda Zia has publicly—and angrily—stated in response to the inclusion of two Jamaat ministers in her cabinet that “there are no talibans in my government.”⁶¹ By contrast, even in the streets of Dhaka, activists of the Jamaat, ICS and HUJI used to proudly identify themselves as “Bangladeshi talibans,” although they stopped using that label, at least in public, following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington.

59. *Eighth Parliamentary Elections 2001*, 17.

60. *The Hindu* (India), 2 April 2002.

61. *Ibid.*, 11 January 2002.

Some Western diplomats in Dhaka also tend to downplay the extremist threat, viewing local militant Islamic movements as rather insignificant fringe groups. During a breakfast meeting in May 2002 in Washington sponsored by the U.S.-Bangladesh Advisory Council, Mary Ann Peters, the ambassador of the United States to Bangladesh, rejected reports of a growing extremist threat. She termed a report in the April 2, 2002 issue of the *Wall Street Journal* as “an example of lack of understanding on the part of journalists covering the country’s political and social structure.” She went on to criticize a similar story in the April 4, 2002 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and called the reporter “lazy” for not working hard enough on the subject and for his failure to give any “clue” in the article that might help make further investigations. She also asserted that media reports about violence against the Hindu community were “exaggerations of facts on the ground.” The U.S. embassy in Dhaka had sent its officers to verify the media reports, and in all cases it was found that the actual situation was less worrisome than what they appeared to be, she said.⁶²

It is uncertain whether the U.S. ambassador’s statements were motivated by a desire to be overly diplomatic, or if they were based on poor intelligence. But such denials will only exacerbate what undoubtedly is a growing problem. It is also important to emphasize that the rise of religious extremism and intolerance in Bangladesh is not just a side effect of military politics. According to Eneyetullah Khan, editor of the Bangladesh weekly *Holiday*, the issue reflects the struggle of a young and fragile nation to find a national identity: “We’re having a bit of an identity crisis here. Are we Bengalis first and Muslims second, or Muslims first and Bengalis second? This is the problem. And when Muslim identity becomes an Islamic identity we’re in real trouble.”⁶³

As Indonesia—another country that until recently was considered a moderate Muslim state—has shown, an economic collapse or political crisis can give rise to militants for whom religious fanaticism equals national pride; and a way out of misrule, disorder and corrupt worldly politics.

62. A summary of Peters’s talk was posted on the internet (bangladesherdak@yahoo.com) shortly after the event. I was the author of the articles in both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

63. Eneyetullah Khan, interview by author, Dhaka, 15 March 2002.

Appendix 1.

Main Islamic Groups in Bangladesh

Jamaat-i-Islami

A political party that dates back to the British colonial era and the (East) Pakistan period (1947–71). It supported Pakistan against the Bengali nationalists during the liberation war, and most of its leaders fled to (West) Pakistan after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Its then *amir*, or leader, Gholam Azam, fought against the freedom fighters in 1971, but returned to Bangladesh a few years later. In December 2000, Motiur Rahman Nizami, another former pro-Pakistani militant, took over as *amir* of the Jamaat. In the October 2001 election, the Jamaat emerged as the third largest party with seventeen seats in the parliament and two ministers in the new coalition government. The Jamaat's final aim is an Islamic state in Bangladesh, although this will be implemented step by step.

Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS)

Jamaat's youth organization. Set up in 1941, it became a member of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations in 1979. ICS is also a member of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth and has close contacts with other radical Muslim youth groups in Pakistan, the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia. One of its main strongholds in Bangladesh is at the university in Chittagong, and it dominates privately run madrassas all over the country. ICS has been involved in a number of bomb blasts and politically and religiously motivated assassinations. Nurul Islam Bulbul is its current president and Muhammed Nazrul Islam is the secretary general.

Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ)

A smaller Islamic party that in 2001 joined the four-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which won the October 2001 election. The IOJ secured two seats in the parliament, but did not get any cabinet posts. The fourth member of the alliance, a faction of the Jatyio Party led by Naziur Rahman Manzur, has no obvious Islamic profile.

Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami (HUJI)

Bangladesh's main militant outfit. Set up in 1992, it now has an estimated strength of fifteen thousand and is headed by Shawkat Osman (aka Maulana or Sheikh Farid) in Chittagong. HUJI's members are recruited mainly from students of the country's many madrassas, and until 2001 they called themselves "Bangladeshi Taliban." The group is believed to have extensive contacts with Muslim organizations in the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam.

"The Jihad Movement"

Osama bin Laden's February 23, 1998 *fatwah* urging jihad against the United States was co-signed by two Egyptian clerics, one from Pakistan, and Fazlul Rahman, "leader of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh." The Jihad Movement is not believed to be a separate organization but a common name for several Islamic groups in Bangladesh, of which HUJI is considered the largest and most important.

Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO)

A political group among Rohingya migrants from Burma who live in the Chittagong–Cox's Bazaar area and claim to be fighting for an autonomous Muslim region in Burma's Arakan (Rakhine) State. ARNO was set up in 1998 through a merger of the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). Within months, however, the front fell apart. The leader of what remains of ARNO, Nurul Islam, is considered a moderate. He also led the ARIF before the merger in 1998.

Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO)

Following the breakup of ARNO in 1999–2000, three new factions emerged, all of them reclaiming the old name RSO. Traditionally, the RSO has been very close to Jamaat-i-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar. In the early 1990s, RSO had several military camps near the Burmese border, where cadres from the Islami Chhatra Shibir were also trained in guerrilla warfare.