

# Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh

A complex web

**Ali Riaz**



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# Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh

In an unprecedented show of force, organization and skill, two proscribed Islamist militant organizations exploded more than 450 bombs within a span of less than an hour throughout Bangladesh on 17 August 2005 sending a strong message that they were a force to be reckoned with. This catastrophic event, followed by a number of suicide attacks, forced the then reluctant Bangladeshi government, a coalition of center-right parties with two Islamists among them, to acknowledge the existence of a network of militants and take action against this threat.

Against this backdrop, this book is the first comprehensive study on the growing Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. It examines the relevance, significance and trajectories of militant Islamist groups in Bangladesh, exploring the complex web of domestic, regional and international events and dynamics that have both engendered and strengthened Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. The three factors – domestic, regional and international aspects – are each discussed separately and their connection and links are analyzed. It goes on to consider possible future trajectories of militant Islamism in Bangladesh.

This book addresses an issue of great importance for contemporary Bangladeshi politics, and will be of interest to scholars of international politics and security studies, including terrorism and the politics of South Asia.

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# Abbreviations and acronyms

ACC	Anti Corruption Commission
AHAB	Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh
AIR	All India Radio
AL	Awami League
ARIF	Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front
ARNO	Arakan Rohingya National Organization
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
ATTF	All Tripura Tiger Force
BAKSAL	Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League
BANBEIS	Bangladesh Bureau of Education Information and Statistics
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBCWST	British Broadcasting Corporation World Service Television
BIOJ	Bangladesh Islami Oikya Jote
BKM	Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BSF	Border Security Force
BTF	Bangladesh Tariqat Federation
BTV	Bangladesh Television
CBI	Central Bureau of Intelligence
CEC	Chief Election Commissioner
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CNN	Cable News Network
CPB	Communist Party of Bangladesh
CTG	Care Taker Government
CUFF	Chittagong Urea Fertilizer Factory
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
EC	Election Commission
ESAF	Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility
EU	European Union
FIR	First Investigation Report
HT	Hizb ut-Tahrir

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HTB	Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh
HuJiB	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islam Bangladesh
HUM	Harkat-ul-Mujahideen
HuT	Hizb ut-Tawhid
IBAR	International Broadcasting and Audience Research
IBBL	Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd
ICS	Islami Chattra Shibir
IDL	Islamic Democratic League
IIRO	International Islamic Relief Organization
IJOF	Islamic Jatiya Oikya Front
IM	Ishlahul Muslimin
IOJ	Islami Oikya Jote
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
ISA	Islami Shashontontro Andolon (Islamic Constitution Movement)
ISI	Inter Services Intelligence
JI	Jamaat-i-Islami
JIC	Joint Interrogation Cell
JIR	Jane's Intelligence Review
JMB	Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (The Assembly of Holy Warriors)
JMJB	Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (The Awakened Muslim Masses of Bangladesh)
JOF	Jatiya Oikyo Front (National United Front)
JP	Jatiya Party
JRB	Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini
JSD	Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal
JSS	Jana Sanghati Samiti
KM	Khelafat Majlish
KN	Khatme Nabuwat
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MRPF	Manipur Revolutionary People's Front
NAP	National Awami Party
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLFT	National Liberation Front of Tripura
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
NUPA	National Unity Party of Arakan
OIC	Organization for Islamic Conference
PBCP	Purba Banglar Communist Party
PBCPML	Purba Banglar Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)
PBCP (ML-J)	Purba Banglar Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Janajudhho)
PLA	People's Liberation Army of Manipur
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization

RAB	Rapid Action Battalion
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
RIHS	Revival of Islamic Heritage Society
RPF	Rohingya Patriotic Front
RSO	Rohingya Solidarity Organization
SiAH	Shahadat-i-Al-Hiqma
SOSH	Servants of Suffering Humanity
SP	Sarbohara Party (Proletariat Party)
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
UN	United Nations
VOA	Voice of America



# Introduction

The rise of Islamism in Bangladesh has attracted the attention of regional and extra-regional analysts intermittently for more than five years. These concerns have become more focused since the 17 August 2005 country-wide series of bomb attacks when two proscribed militant Islamist organizations exploded more than 450 bombs within less than an hour.<sup>1</sup> This unprecedented show of force and organization sent a strong message that Islamist militants were a force to be reckoned with. These events were followed by four incidents of suicide attacks over the next several months, killing at least 30 people and wounding 150 more, orchestrated by the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB, the Assembly of Holy Warriors) and the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB, the Awakened Muslim Masses of Bangladesh).<sup>2</sup> The victims included judges, lawyers, policemen and journalists.

This series of incidents prompted the government's belated acknowledgement of the existence of a militant network, and forced it to act against these organizations. By March 2006 seven key leaders and hundreds of members of the militant network had been arrested and charged with a number of subversive acts. By August 2006, with somewhat unusual speed, local courts had handed down verdicts on a number of these cases convicting the militants. By September 2006, in more than one case, twenty-eight militant leaders had been sentenced to death, and the death sentences of seven militant leaders were confirmed by the Supreme Court.<sup>3</sup> And on 29 March 2007, six militant leaders were executed.

It is almost impossible to calculate the precise number of clandestine militant Islamist groups operating within Bangladesh. The estimated number varies between twenty-nine and fifty-three. However, intelligence reports have indicated that these organizations are likely to be part of one single network and work closely with each other. To date, the government of Bangladesh has banned four of these organizations: the Sahadat-i-Al-Hiqma (banned in February 2003), the JMB and the JMJB (banned in February 2005), and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islam Bangladesh (HuJiB, banned in October 2005).

The menacing acts of these militants, particularly the reign of terror unleashed in the northwest region of the country in 2004 by the JMJB, are well documented in the Bangladeshi and international media, but discussions of the rise of militancy have been descriptive rather than analytical. Additionally, domestic aspects of the



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rise of militancy have been highlighted at the expense of regional and international dynamics.

In this book I examine the domestic, regional and international factors that have contributed to this phenomenon. I argue that Islamist militancy in Bangladesh did not appear suddenly on the political scene; rather, it has developed over the last decade as a result of a combination of domestic, regional and international factors. Their emergence is a testimony to the complex interplay of domestic and international factors in an interdependent world.

There are several reasons why the militant organizations have thrived. First, domestic politics have created an environment for their proliferation. Second, Bangladeshi state institutions are weak in certain geographical areas. Third, a new popular culture glorifies militancy, and fourth they have received support from beyond the borders of Bangladesh. Assistance has come in various forms and from a number of sources, primarily to serve the interests of India and Pakistan but also to serve the interests of arms smugglers. Bangladesh continues to suffer a proxy-war fought on its soil. Insurgents from India and Myanmar joined hands for their own survival and in an exchange of favors while their patrons – states and individuals, either deliberately or unwittingly, turned a blind eye to the long-term consequences. Porous borders enable the militants to come to each other's aid. Inaccessible hills in southeastern Bangladesh for example, provided the hideouts. Events far away and remote from the lives of the Bangladeshis, for example the war in Afghanistan, have cast their long shadows.

The book also examines the future trajectories of militancy. Have the arrests, the trials and executions of key militant leaders, as the Bangladeshi government has claimed, “broken the backbone of the militants”<sup>4</sup> and thus reduced the threat of militancy in the future? Can Bangladesh, with its limited resources and fragile democratic institutions, fight the militants on its own? Is there a role for neighboring countries and the international community in this endeavor? What role can and should Bangladesh's neighbors and the international community play? Given that the international community has limited leverage and that the Bangladeshis are extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of external intervention, it poses a challenge for the international community. Nonetheless, this volume argues for constructive engagement between the international community and Bangladesh.

### **Methodology and caveats**

This book is premised on three claims; first, that these clandestine groups, although commanding very little support within the general populace, are a threat to the public life, national security and future of Bangladesh; second, that they have access to arms and military training and are supported by a political network; and third, that a proper understanding of the political and ideological challenge posed by the Islamists will assist in the forging of an appropriate response to this phenomenon.

It is also important to mention three methodological caveats. First, the nature of militants' operations makes it difficult to collect and confirm information

about these groups. A corollary to this is the problem of identifying the sources in published accounts. Anonymity is required for interviewees and is essential to protect their safety. Due to the nature of the topics involved some discussions conducted for the purposes of this research were completely off the record. Government sources spoke on condition of anonymity. While I have not used information gathered through “off the record” discussions, they have certainly shaped my analysis. In addition to the materials gathered specifically for this book, background data came from the notes I kept as a broadcast journalist while employed at the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC) *World Service* between 1995 and 2000.

Second, and related to the first, misinformation about the principal actors – both individuals and organizations – abounds. This is particularly true for Bangladesh where the media environment is highly politicized and a large section of the media is blatantly partisan. This is complicated by the inability to independently confirm sources.

Third, it is very difficult to assess both the number of the organizations involved in the militancy and their cadres. While the reported arrests provide some clues, this is not a reliable indicator because police and law enforcement agencies lack professionalism and are guided by the political direction set by the government.

Data for this book was gathered between 2004 and 2006 from published and unpublished sources. The author interviewed members of the intelligence community, civil administration, and the police; people “close to” militant organizations; security analysts; and journalists who have followed the militants since their emergence in 1996. The most recent fieldwork was conducted in December 2005–January 2006 when the government launched the drive to arrest the militant leaders. The timing of the fieldwork made access to a number of official sources easier than before, and some previously inaccessible information, particularly regarding the profiles of militant leaders and organizations, was released to the press around this time. Information regarding these profiles has been gathered from security officials, police records and press reports published since 2001. A significant body of information was made available to reporters and researchers in December 2005 and January 2006 by the security agencies, to demonstrate that the government was well aware of the nature and scope of the threat these organizations posed and that law enforcement agencies were actively pursuing the leaders of these organizations. Another factor was the increased and persistent media coverage of militancy following the August 2005 bombings.

As the militant leaders were being arrested more information became public through press reports. This information has been cross-checked with more than one source to ensure its reliability. The activities of the militant organizations have been reported in the Bangladeshi press for quite some time, in piecemeal form and as events were unfolding. I have referred only to those events that have been confirmed by sources close to the militant organizations and in some cases acknowledged by the militants themselves during their interrogations. On a number of occasions information gathered by the Joint Interrogation Cell (JIC) in charge of interrogating the militants was leaked to the press and received wide press coverage in Bangladesh. But extreme caution is exercised in using these so-called

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“confessional statements” primarily because it was not clear whether they were obtained through legal measures.

### **Organization of the book**

The book comprises six chapters and five appendices. Comprehending the scope and nature of Islamist militancy requires an understanding of the position and role of the Islamists within the domestic political landscape of Bangladesh. Mindful of this need, the first chapter provides an overview of Bangladeshi politics. In this chapter I focus on the political history of Bangladesh, party political processes, and the political culture. This chapter provides a discussion of the situation prior to the declaration of the “state of emergency” on 11 January 2007 and the installation of the military-backed interim government. Developments since the new government assumed power are discussed in a separate section. In the second chapter I discuss the status and relevance of the Islamists within Bangladeshi politics. Drawing on election results and political events between January 1991 and January 2007, Islamist political organizations are divided into three groups: those who participate, even if grudgingly, in the existing political system; those who operate within the democratic political system despite reservations; and those who refuse to take part in constitutional politics and remain clandestine. This discussion contextualizes the meteoric rise of the third group, i.e. the militant organizations, in 2004. I also examine the impact of the rise of Islamist parties. This is followed by an exploration of domestic dynamics in the third chapter. In this chapter various factors ranging from the political environment to administrative assent to popular culture are discussed. The regional factors discussed in the fourth chapter cover the roles of the Indian and Pakistani intelligence agencies, sources of weapons, and perceptions of Bangladeshis about the Indian state. How the long shadow of the Afghan War, the dubious roles of the so-called international charities and the foreign policies of western nations have all helped the militants are discussed in the fifth chapter.

While these three sets of factors – domestic, regional and international – are discussed separately, they are not meant to be seen as exclusively separate domains; neither does the order indicate any primacy of factors. These factors have influenced each other in many ways. These discussions lead us to the issue of trajectory. In the concluding chapter of the book I discuss the shortcomings of the steps taken by the Bangladeshi authorities, particularly prior to 11 January 2007, three possible scenarios in regard to the future of the militancy, the actions needed to be taken both in the short and long term, and what the international community can do to combat the growing militancy in Bangladesh.

The unique constitutional provision of the Care Taker Government (CTG) is presented in Appendix 1. Background details and profiles of militants and their organizations are contained in four appendices. Appendix 2 presents a list of high-profile bomb attacks between 1999 and 2005. Appendix 3 presents profiles of five militant organizations operating within the country, namely the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islam Bangladesh (HuJiB), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Jagrata

Muslim Janata Bangladesh (MJJB), Shahadat-i-Al-Hiqma (SiAH), and Hizb ut-Tawhid (HuT). Appendix 4 profiles seven militant leaders: Mufti Abdul Hannan, one of the leaders of the HuJiB; and six members of the highest policy-making body of the JMB: Abdur Rahman, Ataur Rahman; Abdul Awal Sarker; Siddiqui Islam (Bangla Bhai), Salahuddin; Khaled Saifullah.

On 17 August 2005, during the series of blasts across the country, a pamphlet was found at every site of explosion. The pamphlet delineated the goals and objectives of the JMB. A copy of the original pamphlet with a translation is given in Appendix 5.<sup>5</sup>



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