



BANGLADESH

Quick Facts

Population: 157,826,578

Area: 148,460 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Bengali at least 98%, other ethnic groups 1.1%

Religions: Muslim 89.1%, Hindu 10%, other 0.9% (includes Buddhist, Christian)

Government Type: Parliamentary Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$250 Billion

Source: CIA World FactBook (February 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Islam exerts a profound influence on the society and politics of Bangladesh. Islamist activity in Bangladesh takes three broad forms: the traditional revivalism of grassroots movements such as the Hefazat-e-Islam, Ahl-i-Hadith and Tablighi Jama'at; the incremental political Islam of Islamic political parties (most prominently the Bangladeshi Jama'at-i-Islami); and the more radical, subversive activism of jihadist organizations such as the Harkatul Jihad al-Islam (HUJIB) and Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMB), which seek to capture state power through unconstitutional or violent means. Shortly after its independence from Pakistan in December 1971, Bangladesh introduced secularism, before subsequently rejecting it in 1975 in favor of a moderate Muslim state. In 1988, Islam became the official state religion. In 2011, Bangladesh again introduced secularism through the 15th amendment to its constitution. However, Islam remained the official state religion. Currently, Bangladesh's constitution allows for both the freedom of religion and religiously-based politics.¹

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in Bangladesh can be placed in three general categories: the traditional revivalism of grassroots movements, the incremental political Islam of the country's Islamic political parties, and the more radical, subversive activism of jihadist organizations.

Islamic revivalism

Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat), Ahl-i-Hadith Bangladesh (AHAB) and Tablighi Jama'at are the three primary movements in Islamic revivalism.

Bangladesh Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat), meaning "Protectorate of Islam in Bangladesh," began in January 2010, protesting the then Awami League Government's proposed Women Development Policy (Nary Unnayan Nity), which planned to give women rights of inheritance

equal to those of men,² contradicting the Quranic law of inheritance.³ The Hefazat-e Islam is a strong alliance of about a dozen Islamic organizations united under one banner.⁴ Mawlana Ahmad Shafi, a 93-year-old religious scholar and the chairman of the Bangladesh Qaumi Madrassa system,⁵ leads the group.⁶ The headquarters of Hefazat is located in the port city of Chittagong. The organization enjoys the support of more than 25,000 madrassas (religious schools) across Bangladesh, with teachers and students at often belonging to Hefazat groups.⁷

Unlike a political party, Hefazat relies on public pressure in order to protect the country from anti-Islamic activities. The organization claims to be financed through charity and donations.⁸ It does not seek power through elections, but rather aims to extend its support to those parties that can establish proper Islamic ways of lives. It normally organizes issue-oriented programs. It acts as the most influential political-action group in the country. Today the Hefazat is organizing religious movements based on a 13-point agenda, including a ban on the mixing of men and women in public places, the removal of sculptures, and demands for the retention of “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah” in the preamble of the constitution of Bangladesh.⁹ Hefazat-e-Islam ascended to the center of national politics through an extraordinary event that took place in May 2013, when it organized a demonstration of about half a million people—an indication of its strong mobilizing power—and paralyzed the city of Dhaka while demanding the implementation of its 13-point demand platform.¹⁰ Among the existing political parties, all but the Marxist organizations want to build a rapport with Hefazat-e-Islam in order to tap into the group’s huge support base in rural Bangladesh in order to strengthen their future electoral prospects. Mainstream political parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), and Bangladesh Jatyia Party (BJP) either implicitly or explicitly try to maintain links with Hefazat just to exploit their support to help win future elections. Supporters of Hefazat say it is campaigning to “save Islam” in Bangladesh, while its detractors fear that the group will take the country “back into the dark ages”.¹¹

Hefazat took on a prominent public role in 2017. In May, it launched a major protest—one that was not as large as the so-called “Siege of Dhaka” in 2013, but still significant. This time, the cause was much more specific: Hefazat demanded that a statue of Lady Justice, which it deemed offensive to Islam, be removed from the Supreme Court premises in Dhaka. The government gave in and removed the statue, only to eventually return it a few days later, but to a less prominent location. Also in 2017, Hefazat demanded that public school textbooks be more Islam-oriented in nature (once again, the government gave in). And it drew at least 100,000 people to a July protest calling for a new blasphemy law.¹²

Ahl-i-Hadith Bangladesh (AHAB) is another important Islamic revivalist grassroots group. AHAB subscribes to Wahhabi ideology, following the exclusionary teachings of Saudi Arabia’s Islamic ulema (clergy). As part of this worldview, the group does not recognize any single school of law, and relies only on the Quran and hadith.¹³ AHAB exists in about 40 districts, and claims more than 25 million followers.¹⁴ It aims to disseminate the knowledge of the Quran and the hadith, and does not openly involve itself in politics. Instead, it seeks to reorganize the Muslim community and implement the principle of the Kalemay Tayeba (faith) in all walks of life.¹⁵ AHAB’s funding comes from membership donations and a considerable supply of foreign donations, particularly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Arab countries.¹⁶

Tablighi Jama’at was founded in the 1920s by Mohammad Ilyas Shah with the objective of educating non-practicing Muslims on the subcontinent in how to perform daily prayer (salat) and lead a Muslim life in accordance with the teaching of Prophet Muhammad.¹⁷ Tablighi Jama’at aims to bolster Islamic ideals and culture among Muslims.¹⁸ The famous Kakrail mosque in Dhaka serves as the group’s headquarters in Bangladesh. The missionary movement is organized by the volunteer work of dedicated religious individuals of all classes, but the middle class is dominant.¹⁹ It organizes meetings, seminars and symposia, as well as an annual Iste-ma (assembly) attended by millions of people worldwide—the second largest congregation of Muslims in the world, after the pilgrimage to Mecca. That conference is held annually in the industrial town of Tongi on the banks of the Turag River. Although it does not have links with any political party, Tablighi Jama’at receives support from the Bangladeshi government in logistics, maintenance of law and order, traffic, health and sanitation services.²⁰ Millions of followers are active throughout Bangladesh, and the movement has significant impact on social life within the country. Tablighi Jama’at works for the improvement of the individual’s Islamic practices and maintains that it avoids radicalization and overtly political Islam.

Bangladesh is also susceptible to the influence of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), a grassroots Islamist movement formed in Jerusalem in 1953 that aims to establish—through peaceful means—a global Islamic caliphate. Indeed, HuT is unabashedly global, with a major presence not only around the Muslim World but also in the West, including the United States and particularly the United Kingdom. One reason why HuT has such a strong presence in the West is that it is

banned in many Muslim-majority countries, including Bangladesh. However, in Bangladesh, as in Pakistan, Indonesia, and other areas of Muslim-majority Asia, it enjoys a notable underground presence. HuT emerged in Bangladesh around the year 2000, and was banned nine years later. HuT tends to attract well-educated and affluent supporters, as well as members of key professions, including those in the military.

In 2011, authorities arrested several Bangladeshi soldiers for allegedly being linked to HuT and planning to overthrow the government. From that point on, HuT was relatively quiet in Bangladesh until 2017, when it emerged with a new campaign in Chittagong—fueled by wall posters—calling on Muslims to rise up and call for the overthrow of the government, which HuT accused of colluding with the Burmese army to crack down on Rohingya Muslims.²¹ In reality, Dhaka expressed consistent public support for the Rohingya and their plight while confronting the challenge of managing an influx of several hundred thousand of them into Bangladesh over the course of 2017.

Political Islam

The most important Islamist political party is Bangladesh Jama'at-i-Islami (BJI), originally known as simply Jama'at-i-Islami (JI). JI was founded in the early 1940s in British India by Islamic ideologue Syed Abul Ala Moududi. After Bangladesh's independence, JI was banned as a communal party in a secular state.²² Though proscribed, it continued to operate underground. In 1976, the renowned JI leader of former East Pakistan, Maulana Abdur Rahim, resumed JI activities through the formation of a new party called the Islamic Democratic League (IDL).²³ Six JI leaders ran on the IDL ticket and won seats in Bangladesh's parliament in 1979. The JI was then revived and began operating in Bangladesh in 1979 under its acting emir (leader), Abbas Ali Khan, when the ban on religious-based political parties was withdrawn.²⁴ Maulana Motiur Rahman Nijami was then elected emir in 2002, a post he continued to occupy until he was executed in May 2016 pursuant to the verdict of the Highest Court of Bangladesh for war crimes committed in 1971, during the liberation of Bangladesh. After Nijami's death, JI renamed itself BJI and elected Maqbul Ahmed, its acting emir during Nizami's incarceration, as its new leader.²⁵

BJI focuses on obtaining power through democratic elections and the constitutional process. BJI believes in both Bangladeshi nationalism and the idea of Islamic democracy. The JI web site claims that "the JIB is striving democratically to enforce God-fearing, honest, and efficient leadership."²⁶ BJI aims to create national unity and rejuvenate Islamic values in every sphere of national life with the aim to safeguard the country from internal disorder and the attack of outsiders.²⁷ BJI follows four principles: educating the people with proper Islamic knowledge and organizing them; developing moral values among them; providing social services on the basis of Islamic values; and finally, improving the system of governance by replacing the secular and oppressive leadership through God-fearing, honest, and qualified leadership at all levels through democratic means.²⁸ BJI is the largest functioning Islamic party in Bangladesh, and is popular among students, the academic intelligentsia, civil servants, the military and other important sectors of Bangladeshi society.²⁹ However, its overall political impact remains limited; in the country's 1986 parliamentary elections, the JI won 10 seats; in 1991, 18 seats; and in 1996, three seats. In 2001 the JI again secured 17 seats,³⁰ and finally in the 2008 election, the JI once again received only 2 parliamentary seats with just 4.5 percent of the popular vote.³¹ (BJI, as an 18-party alliance partner, did not take part in the 2014 parliamentary elections, so no up-to-date measurement exists of its nationwide popularity.)

The BJI boasts a broad financial network, though its yearly income has never been disclosed publicly. It indirectly operates many financial institutions, including Islamic banks and Islamic insurance companies, as well as private universities, medical colleges and private schools. The Islamic Bank Bangladesh Ltd., a BJI-managed bank, is claimed to have emerged as one of the most successful commercial banks of Bangladesh.³² These businesses generate huge profits.³³ The ruling Awami League government has established control and monitoring of the financial institutions of JI, most prominently by having four of the five-person board of directors for the bank fired and replaced with pro-government directors, after the bank was accused of financing terrorism in 2014.³⁴ Unlike other political parties in Bangladesh, the BJI claims that its workers and members contribute money to the party fund according to their capability.³⁵ The party also has large numbers of supporters and sympathizers in Middle Eastern countries, Europe, and North America, who donate regularly.³⁶ Despite its Islamic ideology, however, BJI has managed to successfully attract Western-educated elites,³⁷ and is now considered to be the premier mainstream Islamic modernist party in the country.

Apart from BJI, many other minor Islamic parties exist in Bangladesh. Although the number of registered Islamic parties stands at just eight, there are more than 100 Islamic parties that exist in one form or another in the country.³⁸ The most important among them are: the

Bangladesh Muslim League, Nizam-I Islam, Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon, Bangladesh Khilafat Majlis, Islamic Andolon, Jamat-i Ulema Islam, and the Islamic Oikko Jote.³⁹ All operate legally under the country's constitution, but their organizations are weak and support bases slim. Like BJI, each advocates the imposition of Islamic law in Bangladesh.

Still, JI remains the most significant Islamic party in Bangladesh, even after being on the receiving end of government crackdowns for many years. The Awami League-led government intensified its crackdown on the group in 2016 and 2017. By 2017, the group had been targeted by the state so heavily—through arrests and other measures—that it had practically lost the ability to mobilize on the streets. While JI is not a violent organization per se, it does have violent factions—most notably its youth wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir, which has been implicated in a series of armed attacks.⁴⁰ With Dhaka having denied JI peaceful channels to relay grievances, and with it banned from participating in elections, there is a strong risk that some of the more hardline members of JI could become radicalized.

Violent Islamist groups

Since the 1990s, al-Qaeda has boasted a considerable presence in Bangladesh, represented by underground organizations such as Harkatul Jihad al-Islam (HUJIB), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). After September 11th and the start of the War on Terror, the al-Qaeda network gravitated even more significantly toward Bangladesh, attracted by the country's fragile economy and weak capacity to combat terrorism.

Harkatul Jihad al-Islam was founded in Bangladesh in 1992, with the goal of establishing Islamic *hukumat* (rule) in Bangladesh via *jihād*.⁴¹ Comprised of veterans of the Afghan *jihād*, HUJIB is reported to have received initial funding from bin Laden's International Islamic Front.⁴² In 2005, the Bangladeshi government banned the organization,⁴³ and in 2008, the U.S. formally listed HUJIB as a terrorist organization.⁴⁴ HUJIB's principal areas of activities are limited to the area between Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, and the border with Myanmar.⁴⁵ The group reportedly maintains six camps in the Chittagong Hill Tract region where its cadres are provided arms training. While there is no authoritative information about the actual size of the group, it is estimated to have around 15,000 members.⁴⁶ Since 2005, frequent raids on HUJIB centers by Bangladeshi Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) police and army—and the continuous monitoring of their activities by law enforcement agencies—have significantly weakened the group's capabilities,⁴⁷ although it is unknown whether this terrorist outfit is totally eliminated or not. HUJIB reportedly receives financial assistance from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan via Muslim non-governmental organizations active in Bangladesh.⁴⁸ Mufti Hannan, HUJIB's operational commander, launched an attack on British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury in 2004. In 2007, he was arrested and sentenced to death for the crime. The appellate Division of the Bangladesh Supreme Court in its final verdict on December upheld the death sentence of Mufti Abdul Hannan and two others in a case filed over the grenade attack on ex-British High commissioner to [Bangladesh](#) Anwar Choudhury in 2004.⁴⁹

The Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) came into existence in 1998 with the aim of establishing sharia law in Bangladesh through armed revolution. Its supreme leader was Shaikh Abdur Rahman, and second in command was Siddiqur Rahman (a.k.a. Bangla Bhai), who also led its military wing, the Jagroto Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). In 2004, Bangla Bhai unleashed a wave of terror in the northern part of Bangladesh as part of an ostensible war on outlawed Marxist extremists. The targets of the JMB onslaught were judges and lawyers, who were targeted in a bid by the group to establish an Islamic legal system.⁵⁰ The group's last large-scale attack was a series of bombings in August 2005. The organization reportedly receives funding from various sources, including individual donors from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Pakistan, and Libya.⁵¹ Funding for the group also flows through NGOs, which—in spite of their ostensibly humanitarian activism—have aided the activities of the JMB.⁵² Several international NGOs—among them the Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage and Doulatul Kuwait, the UAE-based Al Fuzaira, the Bahrain-based Doulatul Bahrain and the Saudi Arabia-based Al Haramain Islamic Institute—have reportedly provided funding to the group in the past.⁵³ The JMB reportedly has approximately 10,000 full time and 100,000 part-time members, including teachers, students and ordinary citizens.⁵⁴ JMB was banned in 2005 by the government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Its principal leader, Abdur Rahman, its second-in-command, Bangla Bhai, and four other members of the *Majlish-e-sura* (the group's top decision making body) were tried and executed in Bangladesh in 2007.⁵⁵ As a result of the execution of their main leaders, strict observation and monitoring of their movements by law enforcement, and the government's zero tolerance policy toward them, the JMB's activities decreased dramatically—though they experienced a resurgence starting around 2015, when ISIS's influence began to pervade Bangladesh (see below).

Bangladesh

Ansarullah BanglaTeam (ABT) is a militant group that has pledged to uphold al-Qaeda's ideology, and is connected with the organization's Persian Gulf franchise, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It began operating in Bangladesh during 2007 under the name Jamaat-ul-Muslimin, but dissolved due to a shortage of funds. The group resurfaced during 2013 as the ABT. The government of Bangladesh banned this terrorist outfit in May 2015 under the country's current anti-terrorism law.⁵⁶ This group has been implicated in the attacks and killings of secular bloggers from 2013-2015.⁵⁷

Domestic jihadism has also been influenced by the Islamic State, which has begun to exert an influence on Islamist activities in Bangladesh. In 2016, the country experienced a series of terrorist attacks reportedly carried out by homegrown terrorists inspired by the Islamic State (ISIS). The most significant one was the attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka on July 1, 2016, which killed 22 people. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the incident, but the Bangladeshi government denied ISIS's involvement and claimed that homegrown militants from JMB were involved.⁵⁸ Experts continue to debate whether the gunmen were linked to ISIS, or al Qaeda, or JMB.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, over 15 people—from religious minorities to a USAID employee—were killed in soft target attacks in 2016.⁶⁰

In 2016 and 2017, ABT and JMB continued to be the primary violent Islamist threats, prompting a major state crackdown on their activities and facilities. Over the summer of 2016, security authorities seized large amounts of weaponry around Dhaka that they claimed were owned by both of these groups, and they also targeted the militants themselves, leading to the deaths of about 30 suspected jihadists in counterterrorism operations. Though terror attacks declined in 2017, jihadists demonstrated their continued ability to target high-profile and supposedly highly secured areas. In March, both ISIS and al-Qaeda's South Asia chapter—known as al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, which has typically been much quieter in Bangladesh than has ISIS—separately claimed responsibility for a suicide attack outside the Dhaka international airport.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Bangladesh, widely regarded as a moderate Muslim democracy, is 89.7 percent Muslim and 9.2 percent Hindu, 0.7 percent Buddhists, and 0.3 percent Christian. Animists and believers in tribal faiths constitute 0.1 percent of the population.⁶¹ More than 98 percent of the population is ethnic Bengali. Non-Bengalis include a minute number of Urdu-speaking Biharis. Among the country's Muslims, more than 99 percent are Sunni and follow the Hanafi school. Several Shia and Ahmadiya sects are also represented, albeit only nominally.⁶²

Mosques in Bangladesh serve as active centers of religious activity. In the country's 65,000 villages, there are an estimated 133,197 mosques, which act as focal points for daily and weekly prayers and assembly.⁶³ Local donations, as well as donations from West Asian and African Muslim countries, provide for the construction and maintenance of these religious centers.⁶⁴ A parallel structure of some 58,126 maqtabs (informal Islamic schools) imparts basic Islamic knowledge to young children (including how to read the Koran, pray, etc.) Mosque imams act as influential elders in the country's rural power structure.

Most Bangladeshis follow an orthodox, traditional version of Islam. Madrassas (Islamic schools) have long been considered to be the center of traditional Islamic studies and the guardians of the orthodox Islam in Bangladesh.⁶⁵ Of these, there are two types: Qomi madrassas are private in nature, receive no financial support from the government, and subsist on religious endowments and donations from the faithful. Alia madrassas, by contrast, are controlled by the government, which pays 80 percent of the salaries of teachers and staff, as well as considerable portions of these schools' development budgets. One estimate shows that the total number of madrassas (both Qomi and Alia) is 13,406, with 230,732 teachers and 3,340,800 students.⁶⁶ These schools constitute the main current of traditional Islam in Bangladeshi society.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The forty-five-year political history of Bangladesh is typified by an official embrace of and accommodation with Islam by a succession of ruling governments. The current government, which claims to be avowedly secular, struggles with the role of Islamism in public life but over the course of 2017 began to explicitly align itself with several Islamist causes.

At the time of the country's independence in December 1971, the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman introduced a secular democracy, and later, one-party authoritarianism. But enforced secularism eventually provoked a backlash from the Muslim majority,⁶⁷ leading to a

greater inclusion of Islam in public life. Prime Minister Rahman (commonly known as “Mujib”) established public foundations in Bangladesh for the research and analysis of Islamic culture and society. Under his direction, Bangladesh also joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, today known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation). Beyond that, however, the practice of Islam in political form was severely circumscribed.

This balance was shattered in 1975 by a coup d’etat that unseated Mujib and installed a military regime in his government’s place. Bangladesh’s new rulers wasted no time dropping secularism from the constitution and inserting a proviso emphasizing “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah.”⁶⁸ Simultaneously, the new government allowed Islamic political parties, through a constitutional amendment, to return to politics, and included a constitutional addendum compelling Bangladesh to maintain fraternal relations among the Islamic countries based on Islamic solidarity.⁶⁹ After the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman in May 1981, power was assumed by General Hossein Mohammad Ershad, who established Islam as the state religion, ushering in a period of relative stability.

In 1990, however, the Ershad regime was ousted as a result of a massive political revolt and purge. Khaleda Zia, Rahman’s widow, assumed power and became the first female prime minister in the new parliamentary democracy. Like her late husband, Zia pursued a pro-Islamic policy both domestically and abroad. In 1996, Sheikh Hasina, one of Mujib’s surviving daughters, rose to power as part of the opposition Awami League (AL) political party, only to be subsequently ousted by a coalition government with Khaleda Zia at its helm.

Hasina has demonstrated a willingness to make common cause with religious radicals for political gain, signing an agreement with Khilafat Majlis—a group considered by some to be a pro-Taliban Islamist group—as a strategy to win the country’s January 2007 election.⁷⁰ The ploy worked, and in 2008 Sheikh Hasina returned to power, further buoyed by her pledge “not to harm Islam.”⁷¹

Despite her earlier partnership with Khilafat Majlis, Hasina has reinforced secularism and generally sought to combat Islamist forces. In February 2009, her government passed two key pieces of legislation: the Money Laundering Prevention Act (MLPA) and the Anti-terrorism Act (ATA).⁷² The former empowered the Bangladesh Bank to freeze the accounts of suspected terrorist financiers, and directed it to take preventive measures against monetary transactions that might be used for financing terror acts. Together with the ATA, it also instituted the death penalty for terror financing and politically motivated acts of violence.⁷³ Furthermore, Hasina’s government has aggressively prosecuted “war criminals”—Bangladeshis who sided with Pakistan during the war for independence—many of whom later became members of JI. This strategy effectively weakened Islamic forces, especially the JI.⁷⁴

In 2011, the government imprisoned the top leaders of the JI and their allies on the grounds of their alleged involvement in crimes against humanity during Bangladesh’s war for independence in 1971. A tribunal, dubbed the International War Crimes Tribunal (ICT), was founded to try the accused. However, the validity of the ICT soon came into serious question. *The Economist* published an investigative report indicating that the chief of the tribunal, Judge Nizamul Haq, had worked improperly by taking written advice and suggestion through e-mail and Skype conversations from an unauthorized Brussels-based lawyer regarding the trial.⁷⁵ At that point, the ICT had already sentenced five BJI leaders to death by hanging. Apart from those sentences, the ICT sentenced two other leaders to death, but the appellate division reduced one man’s sentence to life in prison, while the other escaped. National and international media as well as human rights organizations have questioned the ICT’s track record.⁷⁶ The death sentences also provoked violent protests that resulted in the deaths of 100 people.⁷⁷

Another key blow in the fight against JI came in 2011 when the Bangladesh Parliament passed the 15th amendment of the constitution. The amendment re-introduced secularism as the official framework of the state, but retained Islam as the state religion. In August 2013, the High Court of Bangladesh declared JI illegal, on the grounds that its character violated the newly secular constitution of the country.⁷⁸ At the time, it faced the prospect of becoming a banned organization, and thus unable to enter the January 2014 national election.⁷⁹ Indeed, the appeal court did not give its verdict by the time of the election, and the ruling coalition led by the Awami League captured all 300 seats, whereas 153 candidates were declared uncontested winners in the parliament in the aftermath of the elections boycotted by the 18-party election alliance led by the BNP, one of the largest political parties in Bangladesh.⁸⁰ As of 2017, JI remains banned from contesting elections. A national election is scheduled for 2019. Meanwhile, in a 2016 decision, Bangladesh’s High Court upheld Islam as the official religion of Muslim-majority Bangladesh and legalized the co-existence of secularism and the state religion of Islam.⁸¹

Over the course of 2017, the state’s—and society’s—complex relationship with Islam and

Islam's role in politics continued to be very pronounced. As described above, the Bangladesh government, which has frequently depicted itself as strongly secular—particularly relative to the opposition BNP and especially JI—increasingly identified itself with Islamist causes, including on the school textbook and (until relenting) the Lady Justice statue issues taken up by Hefazat. For the ruling Awami League, such a position was likely meant to court Islamist constituencies in advance of the 2019 election—a constituency likely angered by the AL's heavy-handed treatment of the BNP and JI.⁸²

At the same time, secularist forces have pushed back against the inroads made by Islamists. Back in 2013, they launched a protest campaign, known as the Shahbagh Movement, which called for the death penalty for JI leaders accused of war crimes and for a ban on the JI on the whole. These demands have largely been met (JI is banned from elections and the government hopes to eventually ban it completely). However, the secularists lack the mobilizing power of the likes of Hefazat; they are unable to bring people out onto the street with the numbers enjoyed by Hefazat. Nonetheless, the societal fissures between Islamists and secularists remain deep and could stoke further tensions and violence—a volatile dynamic ripe for exploitation by radicals.

ENDNOTES

1. 1 “Constitutional Amendment In Bangladesh,” *Bangladesh Development Studies*, June 13, 2011, <http://studiesbangladesh.blogspot.ca/2011/06/constitutional-amendments-constitution.html>.
2. 2 [Julien Bouissou](#), “Bangladesh’s radical Muslims uniting behind Hefazat-e- Islam,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/30/bangladesh-hefazat-e-islam-shah-ahmad-shafi>.
3. 3 According to Quranic law, a daughter’s share is half of a son’s. The proposed Women Development Policy, suggested that daughters inherit equal property rights. For details on Muslim family law, see Farah Deeba Chowdhury, *Islam and Women’s Income: Dowry and Law in Bangladesh*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 35-48.
4. 4 Sabir Mustafa “Hefazat-e Islam: Islamist coalition,” *BBC Bengali Service*, May 6, 2013 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22424708>.
5. 5 The Qaumi madrassa is one of the two madra systems in Bangladesh. These madrasahs are run by the community or the people (Qaum), as opposed to the state. Like charitable organizations, these institutions are financed through donations of the community. The Qaumi madrassas in Bangladesh are founded in light of the Darul Ulum Deoband in Uttar Pradesh, India founded in 1867. Hathazari Qaumi Madrassa is the first one established in Bangladesh following the Deoband model. These madrassas are also known as Khwarijee madrassas, which means that they are outside Government control. See, “Modernization of Madrassa Education in Bangladesh: A Strategy Paper,” *Bangladesh Enterprise Institute*, June 2011, http://ndc.gov.bd/lib_mgmt/webroot/earticle/2379/modernization_of_madrassa_education_in_Bangladesh.pdf.
6. 6 Born in Rangunia in Chittagong district, Maolana Shafi earned higher education in Islamic Studies in Deoband in India. He returned to teaching at the Hat-hazari madrasah, where he had once studied, and later became its Principal. See, [Toufique Imrose Khalidi](#), “Behind the rise of Bangladesh’s Hifazat,” *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/05/201356134629980318.html>.
7. 7 Sabir Mustafa “Hefazat-e Islam: Islamist coalition” *BBC Bengali Service*, May 2013 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22424708>.
8. 8 [Julien Bouissou](#), “Bangladesh’s radical Muslims.”
9. 9 The 13 point demands raised by the Hefazat-e-Islam are the following:
10. 1.Reinstate the phrase “Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” in the Constitution as one of the fundamental principles of state policy;2.Pass a law providing for capital punishment for maligning Allah, Islam and the Prophet Muhammad and for starting smear campaigns against Muslims; 3.Stop all propaganda and “derogatory comments” about the Prophet Muhammad by “atheist leaders” of the Shahbagh movement, atheist bloggers and other anti-Islamists;

arrest them and ensure stern punishment to them; 4. Stop attacking, shooting, killing and persecuting the Prophet-loving Islamic scholars, madrasa students and people united by belief in Allah; 5. Release all the arrested Islamic scholars and madrasa students; 6. Lift restrictions on mosques and remove obstacles for the holding of religious programmes; 7. Declare Qadianis (Ahmadiyyas) non-Muslim and stop their publicity and conspiracies; 8. Stop foreign cultural intrusions, including free-mixing of men and women and candle-light vigils, and put an end to adultery, injustice and shamelessness, among other things, committed in the name of freedom of expression and the individual; 9. Stop turning Dhaka, the city of mosques, into a city of idols, and stop installing sculptures at road intersections, colleges and universities. 10. Scrap anti-Islam women policy and education policy and make Islamic education mandatory from primary to higher secondary levels; 11. Stop threatening and intimidating teachers and students of the Qawmi madrasahs, Islamic scholars, imams and *khatibs*; 12. Stop creating hatred among the younger generation against Muslims by misrepresentation of Islamic culture in the media; 13. Stop anti-Islam activities by non-governmental organisations, evil attempts by Qadianis and conversion by Christian missionaries in Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere in the country. See, *Frontline*, May 17, 2013. Online: <http://www.frontline.in/world-affairs/the-13-demands/article4650805.ece>.

11. 10 [Julien Bouissou](#), “Bangladesh’s radical Muslims.”
12. 11 [Julien Bouissou](#), “Bangladesh’s radical Muslims.”
13. 12 For more details, see Michael Kugelman and Atif Ahmad, “Why Extremism Is on the Rise in Bangladesh,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-07-27/why-extremism-rise-bangladesh>.
14. 13 Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh; Religion, Ethnicity and Language in an Islamic Nation*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 56.
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