



# BANGLADESH

## Quick Facts

Population: 162,650,853 (July 2020 est.)  
Area: 148,460 sq km  
Ethnic Groups: Bengali at least 98%, ethnic groups 1.1%  
Government Type: Parliamentary republic  
GDP (official exchange rate): \$261.5 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

## INTRODUCTION

*Islam exerts a profound influence on the society and politics of Bangladesh. Islamist activity in the country takes three broad forms: the traditional revivalism of grassroots movements such as the He-fazat-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.*

*Since 1988, Islam has served as the state religion, although Bangladesh's constitution allows for both freedom of religion and religiously-based politics. Terrorist attacks have been fairly uncommon in recent years, a credit to the government's vigilance. However, heavy-handed tactics to counter violent Islamic extremism, while effective, nonetheless carry the risk of radicalizing Islamist groups that currently wish to participate in legitimate political institutions.*

## 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. The level of Islamist activity in Bangladesh differs depending on the type. Islamic revivalist groups are highly active, as measured by their ability to mobilize and to protest. Islamic political parties, while present, are not as active in Bangladesh as in recent years due to heavy government crackdowns. Violent *jihadist* groups are present in Bangladesh as well, but they are not as active as they were several years ago, and particularly in 2015 and 2016—a period of frequent terrorist violence in Bangladesh—because of government crackdowns.

*Islamic Revivalism**Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (Protectorate of Islam in Bangladesh)*

Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, or Hefazat, emerged in January 2010 in opposition to the Awami League government's proposed *Nary Unnayan Nity* (Women Development Policy). The policy would give women inheritance rights equal to those of men, contradicting the Quranic law of inheritance – under which a woman's share is half that of a man.<sup>1</sup> Hefazat is a conglomerate of about a dozen Islamic organizations, and is led by Mawlana Ahmad Shafi,<sup>2</sup> a 99-year-old religious scholar and the chairman of the Bangladesh Qaumi *Madrassa* (religious school) system.<sup>3</sup> To date, the organization enjoys the support of more than 25,000 *madrassas* across Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike a political party, Hefazat relies on public pressure to protect the country from anti-Islam activities. The organization claims to be financed through charity and donations.<sup>5</sup> While Hefazat does not seek explicit political power, it acts as Bangladesh's most influential, informal political action group by supporting certain preferred political parties. Today, Hefazat is organizing based on a 13-point agenda, including a ban on the mixing genders 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.<sup>6</sup>

Hefazat ascended to the center of national politics in May 2013 when it organized the “Siege of Dhaka,” a demonstration of about half a million people—an indication of its strong mobilizing power—that paralyzed the capital city while demanding the implementation of its 13-point demand platform.<sup>7</sup> All Bangladeshi political parties except the Marxist ones desire to build a rapport with Hefazat in order to tap into the group's huge support base in rural Bangladesh. 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. 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.”<sup>8</sup>

In May 2017, the group launched a major targeted protest, demanding that a statue of Lady Justice, which it deemed to be offensive to Islam, be removed from the Supreme Court premises in Dhaka. The government conceded and removed the statue, only to eventually return it to a less prominent location a few days later. That same year, Hefazat demanded that public school textbooks be more Islam-oriented in nature; the government again obliged. The group also drew at least 100,000 people to a July 2017 protest calling for a new blasphemy law.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Hefazat has called for a new law that would execute anyone who criticizes Allah or the Prophet Muhammad. According to the State Department's 2018 report on international religious freedom, Bangladesh's current penal code stipulates that “statements or acts made with a ‘deliberate and malicious’ intent to insult religious sentiments’ can lead to fines or up to two years in prison... Although the code does not further define this prohibited intent, the courts have interpreted it to include insulting the Prophet Muhammad.” However, there is currently no blasphemy law on the books in Bangladesh.<sup>10</sup>

*Ahl-i-Hadith Bangladesh (AHAB)*

AHAB is another important Islamic revivalist grassroots group. AHAB subscribes to *Wahhabbi* 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*.<sup>11</sup> AHAB exists in about 40 districts and claims more than 25 million followers.<sup>12</sup> It aims to disseminate the knowledge of the Quran and the *hadith*, but AHAB does not openly involve itself in politics. Instead, it seeks to reorganize the Muslim community and implement the principle of the *Kalemai Tayeba* (faith) in all walks of life.<sup>13</sup> AHAB's funding comes from membership donations and a considerable supply of foreign donations, particularly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Arab countries.<sup>14</sup>

### *Tablighi Jama'at (TJ) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT)*

TJ was founded in the 1920s by Mohammad Ilyas Shah with the objective of teaching non-practicing Muslims on the subcontinent how to perform daily prayer and to live in accordance with the teaching of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>15</sup> 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, though the middle class is dominant.<sup>16</sup> It organizes meetings, seminars, and symposia, as well as an annual *Istema* (assembly) in the industrial town of Tongi on the banks of the Turag River. It is the second largest congregation of Muslims in the world after the pilgrimage to Mecca. 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.<sup>17</sup> Millions of followers are active throughout Bangladesh, and the movement has significant impact on social life within the country. Tablighi Jama'at works to improve individual 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 a global Islamic caliphate through peaceful means. HuT maintains a major presence, not only throughout the Muslim World but also in the West, including the United States and particularly the United Kingdom. However, it is banned in many Muslim-majority countries, including in Bangladesh, but nevertheless enjoys a notable underground network there (as it does in Pakistan, Indonesia, and other areas of Muslim-majority Asia). HuT emerged in Bangladesh around 2000 (it was subsequently banned in 2009). It tends to attract well-educated and affluent supporters as well as members of key professions, including military personnel.<sup>18</sup>

In 2011, authorities arrested several Bangladeshi soldiers for alleged links to HuT and plans 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. HuT accused the Bangladeshi government of colluding with the Burmese army to crack down on Rohingya Muslims.<sup>19</sup> In reality, Dhaka expressed consistent public support for the Rohingya and their plight while managing an influx of several hundred thousand of them into Bangladesh throughout 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, although it continued to operate underground.<sup>20</sup> In 1976, the renowned JI leader of former East Pakistan, Maulana Abdur Rahim, resumed JI activities when he formed the Islamic Democratic League (IDL).<sup>21</sup> 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*, Abbas Ali Khan, when the ban on religious-based political parties was withdrawn.<sup>22</sup> Maulana Motiur Rahman Nijami was elected *emir* in 2002, a post he continued to occupy until he was executed in May 2016 for war crimes committed during the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. After Nijami's death, JI renamed itself BJI and elected Maqbul Ahmed as its new leader.<sup>23</sup>

BJI focuses on obtaining power through democratic elections and the constitutional process. BJI believes in both Bangladeshi nationalism and Islamic democracy. The group's web-site claims that "the BJI is striving democratically to enforce God-fearing, honest, and efficient leadership."<sup>24</sup> BJI aims to create national unity and rejuvenate Islamic values in every sphere of national life with the goal of safeguarding the country from internal disorder and the attack of outsiders.<sup>25</sup> To do this, 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 with God-fearing, honest, and qualified

leadership” at all levels through democratic means.<sup>26</sup> The largest functioning Islamic party in Bangladesh, BJI is popular among students, the academic intelligentsia, civil servants, the military, and other important sectors of Bangladeshi society.<sup>27</sup> However, its overall political impact remains limited; since 1986, JI has never won more than 18 seats in parliamentary elections.<sup>28</sup> BJI, as a partner in the country’s 18-party political alliance, did not take part in the 2014 parliamentary elections, so no up-to-date measurement of its nationwide popularity exists.

BJI boasts a broad financial network, though its yearly income has never been disclosed publicly. It indirectly operates many financial institutions, including Islamic banks, Islamic insurance companies, private universities, medical colleges, and private schools. The Islamic Bank Bangladesh Ltd., a BJI-managed bank, reportedly emerged as one of the most successful commercial banks of Bangladesh.<sup>29</sup> The ruling Awami League government replaced four of the bank’s five-person Board of Directors with pro-government functionaries after the bank was accused of financing terrorism in 2014.<sup>30</sup> BJI claims that its workers and members contribute money to the party fund according to their capabilities; the groups also receives regular donations from supporters and sympathizers in the Middle East, Europe, and North America.<sup>31</sup> BJI has managed to successfully attract Western-educated elites, and is now considered the premier Islamic modernist party in the country.<sup>32</sup>

Many other minor Islamic parties exist in Bangladesh. Although the registered number stands at eight, more than 100 Islamic parties exist in one form or another.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> Their organizations are weak and have slim support bases. Like BJI, each advocates for the imposition of Islamic law in Bangladesh.

BJI remains the most significant Islamic party in Bangladesh, even after being on the receiving end of government crackdowns for many years. While BJI is not a violent organization *per se*, it does have violent factions—most notably its youth wing, known as the Islami Chhatra Shibir, which has been implicated in a series of armed attacks.<sup>35</sup> There remains a strong risk that some of the more hardline members of the group could become radicalized, since Dhaka has denied BJI peaceful channels through which to relay grievances and the ability to participate in elections.

### *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).

HUJIB was founded in Bangladesh in 1992 with the goal of establishing Islamic *hukumat* (rule) in Bangladesh via *jihad*.<sup>36</sup> Comprised of veterans of the Afghan *jihad*, HUJIB reportedly received initial funding from bin Laden’s International Islamic Front.<sup>37</sup> In 2005, the Bangladeshi government banned the organization, and in 2008, the U.S. formally listed HUJIB as a terrorist group.<sup>38</sup> HUJIB’s principal activities are limited to the area between Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh, and the country’s border with Myanmar.<sup>39</sup> 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 has been estimated to have around 15,000 members.<sup>40</sup> HUJIB reportedly receives financial assistance from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan via NGOs active in Bangladesh.<sup>41</sup> Mufti Hannan, HUJIB’s operational commander, launched an attack on British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury in 2004. In 2007, Hannan was arrested and sentenced to death for the crime (the sentence was upheld upon appeal in 2007).<sup>42</sup> Since 2005, the Bangladeshi Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) police and army have frequently raided HUJIB operation centers and monitored HUJIB activities, significantly weakening the group’s capabilities.<sup>43</sup> As a result, HUJIB has not carried out a high-profile attack in over a decade, and it is currently unknown whether the group remains operational.

JMB was founded in 1998 with the aim of establishing *sharia* law in Bangladesh through armed rev-



olution. Its supreme leader was Shaikh Abdur Rahman, whose second in command was Siddiqur Rahman (a.k.a. Bangla Bhai). Bangla Bhai also led the group's military wing, known as the Jagroto Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). In 2004, Bangla Bhai led a wave of terror attacks in the northern part of Bangladesh. The objects of the JMB onslaught were judges and lawyers, who were targeted as part of the organization's push to establish an Islamic legal system.<sup>44</sup> 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 for the group in the past.<sup>45</sup> The JMB reportedly has approximately 10,000 full-time and 100,000 part-time members, including teachers, students, and ordinary citizens.<sup>46</sup> JMB was banned in 2005 by the government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Shaikh Abdur Rahman, Bangla Bhai, and four other members of the *Majlish-e-sura* (the group's top decisionmaking body) were tried and executed in 2007.<sup>47</sup> JMB activities between 2007 and 2015 decreased dramatically as a result of these executions, strict observation and monitoring by law enforcement, and a blanket government zero tolerance policy. The group experienced a resurgence in 2015, however, when the Islamic State became present in Bangladesh.

ABT is a militant group pledged to uphold al-Qaeda's ideology and is connected with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). It began operating in Bangladesh in 2007 under the name Jamaat-ul-Muslimin but dissolved due to lack of funding. The group resurfaced during 2013 as the ABT, and was implicated in attacks and killings of secular bloggers between 2013 and 2015.<sup>48</sup> The government of Bangladesh formally banned ABT in May 2015 under the country's current anti-terrorism law.<sup>49</sup> Since it was banned, ABT's profile has decreased significantly. This can be attributed to the Bangladeshi state's heavy crackdown on Islamist militants. However, the group appears to have remained active and relocated assets outside of Bangladesh. In late 2017, Indian officials announced they had arrested an ABT-linked militant in Kolkata.<sup>50</sup>

Islamist activities in Bangladesh have been influenced by the Islamic State. In 2016, the country experienced a series of terrorist attacks reportedly carried out by homegrown terrorists inspired by 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 claimed that homegrown militants from JMB were instead responsible.<sup>51</sup> Experts continue to debate whether the gunmen were linked to ISIS, al Qaeda, or JMB.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, over 15 people—including religious minorities and a USAID employee—were killed in soft target attacks in 2016.<sup>53</sup>

Because multiple militant groups often claim responsibility for terror attacks and because the Bangladeshi government has often denied that foreign terror groups such as ISIS have a presence in the country, it is difficult to say conclusively who carried out these attacks. The best estimate is that ISIS has carried out several of them, including the Holey Bakery attack, with help from JMB. ABT has carried out some smaller-scale attacks, sometimes targeting people they perceive to be affronts to Islam (such as those who are secular, Shi'a, or gay).

For a period of time in 2015 and 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for several attacks in Bangladesh. After the April 2019 Sri Lanka attacks, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack that injured three police officers in Dhaka. Several other ISIS-claimed attacks have taken place in Bangladesh since.<sup>54</sup> Ominously, about a week after the Sri Lanka attack, ISIS released a statement on social media in the Bangla language bearing the phrase "coming soon" and indicating a potential future attack in Bangladesh.<sup>55</sup>

Dhaka must also manage the return of nationals that had been fighting with ISIS in Iraq and Syria. According to a July 2018 King's College report, as many as 40 people in Bangladesh may have gone to fight with ISIS in those two countries.<sup>56</sup>

In 2016 and 2017, ABT and JMB remained the primary violent Islamist threats, prompting a major state crackdown. Security authorities seized large amounts of weaponry around Dhaka allegedly owned by these groups and roughly 30 suspected *jihadists* were killed in counterterror operations. In 2017, *jihadists*

continued to demonstrate their ability to target high-profile, supposedly highly secured areas. In March 2017, both ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) separately claimed responsibility for a suicide attack outside the Dhaka international airport. Over the past couple of years, however, ABT, JMB, and ISIS were quiet in Bangladesh—perhaps as a consequence of the heavy-handed counterterrorism measures.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

In the country's 65,000 villages, there are an estimated 133,197 mosques.<sup>57</sup> Local donations, as well as donations from West Asian and African Muslim countries, provide for mosque construction and maintenance.<sup>58</sup> A parallel structure of some 58,126 *maqtabas* (informal Islamic schools) imparts basic religious knowledge to young children.<sup>59</sup> Mosque *imams* act as influential elders in the country's rural power structure.

*Madrassas* have long been considered the center of traditional Islamic studies and the guardians of orthodox Islam in Bangladesh.<sup>60</sup> Qomi *madrassas* are private, 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. These schools constitute the main current of traditional Islam in Bangladeshi society.

Recent figures on the amount of *madrassas* and their associated students and teachers are difficult to come by. Based on 2004 figures, the number of *madrassas* was estimated at 13,406, with 230,732 teachers and 3,340,800 students.<sup>61</sup> Somewhat more recent estimates, from 2008, claimed that the number of *Alia madrassas* stood at about 14,000, with about 4,600,000 students enrolled in these institutions. The number of Qomi *madrassas* was nearly 40,000, with about 5,200,000 students. By 2015, however, the number of *Alia madrassas* was estimated to be down to about 9,300, with about 2,400,000 students enrolled in them.<sup>62</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The 45-year political history of Bangladesh is typified by a succession of ruling governments embracing and accommodating both Islam and Islamism. The current government claims to be avowedly secular but has recently begun to explicitly align itself with several Islamist causes, many of them championed by Hefazat. These moves included, in 2017, (briefly) relocating a statue of lady liberty from the Supreme Court building in Dhaka because Hefazat believed it was an affront to Islam, and also siding with Islamists' calls for changes to public school textbooks.<sup>63</sup> More recently, in 2018, the government took steps to bring Qawmi *madrassas* – the unregulated and private *madrassas* in Bangladesh that are often overseen by Hefazat – into the education mainstream.<sup>64</sup>

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 provoked a backlash from the country's Muslim majority, leading to a greater inclusion of Islam in public life.<sup>65</sup> 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 (today known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation). Beyond that, however, the practice of Islam in political form was severely circumscribed.

A 1975 *coup d'état* that unseated Mujib and installed a military regime shattered the balance. Bangladesh's new rulers wasted no time dropping secularism from the constitution and inserting a provision emphasizing "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah."<sup>66</sup> The new government allowed Islamic political parties to return to politics and included a constitutional addendum compelling Bangladesh to maintain fraternal relations with Islamic countries.<sup>67</sup> After the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman in May

1981, General Hossein Mohammad Ershad assumed power and established Islam as the state religion, ushering in relative stability.

In 1990, however, the Ershad regime was ousted by 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 only to be 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 pro-Taliban—as a strategy to win the country's January 2007 election.<sup>68</sup> In 2008, Sheikh Hasina returned to power, further buoyed by her pledge “not to harm Islam.”<sup>69</sup>

However, 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).<sup>70</sup> The former empowered the Bangladesh Bank to freeze the accounts of suspected terrorist financiers and directed it to take preventive measures against monetary transactions possibly used for financing terror acts. With the ATA, it also instituted the death penalty for terror financing and politically motivated acts of violence.<sup>71</sup> 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 weakened Islamic forces, especially the JI.<sup>72</sup>

In 2011, the government imprisoned JI's top leaders and their allies on the grounds of their alleged involvement in crimes against humanity during Bangladesh's war for independence in 1971. The International War Crimes Tribunal (ICT) was founded to try the accused. However, the validity of the ICT soon came into serious question when *The Economist* published an investigative report indicating that the chief of the tribunal, Judge Nizamul Haq, took written advice and suggestion through e-mail and Skype conversations from an unauthorized Brussels-based lawyer regarding the trial.<sup>73</sup> At that point, the ICT had already sentenced five JI leaders to death. 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. The death sentences also provoked violent protests that resulted in the deaths of 100 people.<sup>74</sup>

Another key blow in the fight against JI came in 2011 when the Bangladeshi Parliament passed the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution, which re-introduced official state secularism 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.<sup>75</sup> The appeals court did not give its verdict by the time of the election, and thus JI was unable to enter the January 2014 national election.<sup>76</sup> The ruling coalition led by the Awami League captured all 300 seats; 158 candidates were declared uncontested winners in the aftermath of the elections boycott by the 18-party election alliance led by the BNP.<sup>77</sup> What is now the BJI remains banned from contesting elections, including Bangladesh's 2018 national elections. 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 Islam.<sup>78</sup>

The Bangladesh government's increasing identification with political Islam was likely meant to court Islamist constituencies in advance of the December 2018 election—a bloc likely angered by the heavy-handed treatment of the BNP and what is now the BJI.<sup>79</sup> However, secularist forces have pushed back against the inroads made these groups. In 2013, they launched the Shahbagh protests, which called for the death penalty for BJI leaders accused of war crimes and for a ban on BJI as a whole. These demands have largely been met (BJI is banned from elections, and the government hopes to eventually ban it completely) and the Awami League, supported by Shahbagh protestors, won the 2014 and 2018 national elections. These results can be attributed to economic growth and effective official crackdowns against

terror – as well as struggles on the part of Islamist parties to mount a strong campaign.

However, the AL's lock on political power in Bangladesh since the 2018 elections is not ironclad. A recent poll conducted by the International Republican Institute reveal dissatisfaction with government performance. Conducted in August and September 2019, the survey shows popular opinion of governmental performance to be at something of a crossroads: while 83 percent of surveyed people support the Alwani League – a 19 percent improvement over 2018 – 70 percent of respondents believed it should be more inclusive, and include other parties in the official decision-making process. What's more, corruption and economic performance were cited as the two most significant problems facing the country, indicating on-going grassroots concerns.<sup>80</sup> These concerns, if not properly addressed, could serve as drivers for militant sentiment.

## ENDNOTES

1. Julien Bouissou, "Bangladesh's radical Muslims uniting behind Hefazat-e-Islam," *Guardian* (London), July 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/30/bangladesh-hefazat-e-islam-shah-ahmad-shafi>. 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.
2. 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 *madrassa*, where he had once studied, and later became its Principal. See Toufique Imrose Khalidi, "Behind the rise of Bangladesh's Hifazat," *Al Jazeera* (Doha), May 9, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/05/201356134629980318.html>.
3. Sabir Mustafa "Hefazat-e-Islam: Islamist coalition," *BBC Bengali Service*, May 6, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22424708>; The *Qaumi madrassa* is one of the two *madari* systems in Bangladesh. These *madrassas* 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](http://ndc.gov.bd/lib_mgmt/webroot/earticle/2379/modernization_of_madrassa_education_in_Bangladesh.pdf).
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12. "Ahle Hadith: New moves in religion-based politics," *PROBE News Magazine*, September 23, 2010, <http://web.archive.org/web/20120324204417/http://www.probenewsmagazine.com/index.php?index=2&contentId=596>.



13. K.M. Mohsin, "The Ahl-I Hadis movement in Bangladesh," in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed. *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh* (New Delhi: South Asian publishers, 1990), 179-182.
14. The Kuwait based NGO Saudi Revival of Islamic Heritage (RIHS) is the main source of funding to the Ahle Hadith Bangladesh. See *PROBE News Magazine* 9, iss. 14, September, 2010, 24-30. On this issue, see also Mumtaz Ahmad, "Ahl-e-Hadith Movement in Bangladesh: History, Religion, Politics and Militancy," unpublished paper, May 2006, <http://www.iiu.edu.pk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/ird/downloads/Ahl-e-Hadith-Movement-in-Bangladesh-Complete.pdf>.
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