

# American Foreign Policy Council

## BANGLADESH

### QUICK FACTS

Population: 158,065,841

Area: 143,998 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Bengali 98%, other 2% (includes tribal groups, non-Bengali Muslims)

Religions: Muslim 89.5%, Hindu 9.6%, other 0.9%

Government Type: Parliamentary democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$93.2 billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)

*The nature of Islam in Bangladesh exerts a profound influence on the country's society and politics. Islamist activity in Bangladesh, viewed generally, takes three broad forms: the traditional revivalism of grassroots movements such as the Ahl-i-Hadith and Tablighi Jama'at; the incremental political Islam of Islamic political parties (most prominently the Bangladesh 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. Bangladesh has emerged as a moderate Muslim country through the accommodation made by successive governments between Islamic and secular values, in large part because of Islam's preeminence in as a source of religio-cultural*

*identity.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in Bangladesh, viewed generally, takes three broad forms: 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*

Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh is typified by two main movements. The first, the Ahl-i-Hadith Bangladesh, was founded in British India in the 1830s, and matured significantly in Bengal. Siddiq Hasan and Syed Nazir Hossain were the original founders of this traditional Islamist group.<sup>1</sup> In 1946, All Bengal and Assam Jamat-i-Ahl-i-Hadith was formed and headquartered in Calcutta. Following the independence of Pakistan from India, the East Pakistan Jamiat-i-Ahle Hadith was founded in Pabna in 1953 by Maulana Abdulla Hil Baki.<sup>2</sup> Still later, the organization was renamed the Bangladesh Jamiat-e-Ahle Hadith. This group is known to be Wahhabi in outlook, following the exclusionary teachings of Saudi Arabia's Islamic *ulema* (clergy). As part of this worldview, the Ahl-i-Hadith does not recognize any single school of law, and relies only on the Koran and *Hadith*.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, they are called la-Mazhabi, meaning that they do not believe in any of the four Mazhabs or school of law.<sup>4</sup> It claims to be the only group in the Muslim community that follows the Koran and *Hadith* correctly and exactly. Apart from donations and charity from its members, the group reportedly receives considerable foreign donations, especially from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries.<sup>5</sup> The group exists in about 40 districts, and claims more than 25 million people as followers.<sup>6</sup> It aims to disseminate the knowledge of the Koran and the *Hadith*, and does not openly involve itself in political controversy. Instead, it seeks to reorganize the Muslim community and implement the principle of the *Kalemai Tayeba* (faith) in all walks of life.<sup>7</sup>

The second is the Tablighi Jama'at, founded in the 1920s by Mohammad Ilyas Shah with the objective of educating non-practicing Muslims on the subcontinent how to perform daily prayer (*salat*) and lead a Muslim life in accordance with the teaching of

Prophet Muhammad.<sup>8</sup> Devotion to Allah as a means of self purification, respect to others and missionary works constitute the organization's three most important tenets. The famous Kakrail mosque in Dhaka serves as the group's headquarters in Bangladesh. The missionary movement is organized by the voluntary input of dedicated religious individuals of all classes, but the middle class is dominant.<sup>9</sup> The goal of the Tablighi Jama'at is to infuse Islamic ideals and culture among the Muslims who have deviated from the practice of Islam for material gain.<sup>10</sup> The movement depends on the endeavor, dedication and labor of its members. It organizes meetings, seminars and symposia, as well as an annual *Istema* (assembly) attended by millions of people worldwide—the second largest congregation of Muslims in the world, after Mecca, 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.<sup>11</sup> Millions of followers are active throughout Bangladesh, and the movement has significant impact on social life within the country.

### *Political Islam*

The Jama'at-i-Islami (JI) was founded in the early 1940s in British India by Islamic ideologue Syed Abul Ala Moududi. It began operating in Bangladesh in 1979 under its acting *Amir* (head) Abbas Ali Khan. He was succeeded in 1991 by Professor Golam Azam, who oversaw the group's activities before voluntarily resigning in 2002.<sup>12</sup> Maulana Motiur Rahman Nijami was then elected as *amir*, a post he continues to occupy to this day. The main goal of JI is to establish an Islamic state through democratic elections and the constitutional process. The JI believes in both Bangladeshi nationalism and the idea of "Islamic democracy."<sup>13</sup>

The party is organized, disciplined and enjoys a modicum of popular support. It 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.<sup>14</sup> However, its overall political impact remains limited; in the country's 2008 election, JI received just 4.5 percent of the popular vote.<sup>15</sup>

The party boasts a broad financial network. It indirectly operates many financial institutions, including Islamic banks and Islamic insurance companies, as well as private universities, medical colleges and private schools. These businesses generate huge profits, which in turn go to fund party operations. (The amount of yearly income of the JI has never been disclosed publicly.) The party also has large numbers of supporters and sympathizers in Middle Eastern countries, Europe and North America, who contribute regularly to the party fund.<sup>16</sup> Despite its fundamentalist Islamic ideology, however, JI has managed to successfully attract western-educated elites,<sup>17</sup> and is now considered to be the premier mainstream Islamic modernist party in the country.

Apart from JI, several other minor Islamic parties exist in Bangladesh. They include 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>18</sup> All operate legally under the country's constitution, but their organizations are weak and support bases slim. Like JI, each advocates the imposition of Islamic law in Bangladesh.

### *Radical Islam*

Against the backdrop of September 11th and the ensuing War on Terror, the bin Laden network has gravitated to Bangladesh, attracted by the country's fragile economy and weak capacity to combat terrorism. Since the 1990s, al-Qaeda has boasted a considerable presence in Bangladesh, represented by underground organizations such as Harkatul Jihad al-Islam (HUJIB) and Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMB).

*Harkatul Jihad al-Islam* was founded in Bangladesh in 1992. The goal of the HUJIB is to establish Islamic *bukumat* (rule) in Bangladesh via *jihad*.<sup>19</sup> Comprised of veterans of the Afghan *jihad*, HUJIB is reported to have received initial funding from bin Laden's International Islamic Front.<sup>20</sup> In 2008, the U.S. listed HUJIB as a terrorist organization,<sup>21</sup> and the government of Bangladesh has formally banned the organization as well.<sup>22</sup> HUJIB's principal areas of activities are limited to the area between Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh and the border with Myanmar.<sup>23</sup> The HUJIB reportedly maintains six camps in the hilly Chittagong Hill Tract region where its cadres

are provided arms training. While there is no authoritative information on the actual size of the group, it is estimated to have around 15,000 members.<sup>24</sup> Since 2005, frequent raids on HUIB 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.<sup>25</sup> HUIB reportedly receives financial assistance from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan via Muslim non-governmental organizations active in Bangladesh.<sup>26</sup> Its operational commander, Mufti Hannan, was arrested in 2007 and is currently facing trial under Bangladeshi law.

*The Jammatul 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 reign of terror in the northern part of Bangladesh as part of an ostensible war on outlawed Marxist extremists. But the proximate targets of the JMB onslaught were judges and lawyers, who were targeted in a bid by the group to establish an Islamic legal system.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> Funding for the group also flows through NGOs, which—in spite of their ostensibly-humanitarian activism—have aided the activities of the JMB.<sup>29</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—reportedly have provided funding to the group.<sup>30</sup> The JMB reportedly has approximately 10,000 fulltime and 100,000 part-time members, including teachers, students and ordinary citizens.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

## 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, 0.3 percent Christian. Animist and believers in tribal faith constitute 0.1 percent of the population.<sup>33</sup> Islam serves as the religio-cultural identity of the predominantly Muslim country. 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 of thought. Several Shi'a and Ahmadiya sects are also represented, albeit only nominally.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> Local donations, as well as donations from West Asian and African Muslim countries, provide for the construction and maintenance of these religious centers.<sup>36</sup> A parallel structure of some 58,126 *maqtabas* (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. On the whole, therefore, society in Bangladesh can be termed "mosque-centric."

Most Bangladeshis follow an orthodox, traditional version of Islam—one which includes the traditional teachings of their forefathers. Their beliefs are centered on the five pillars of Islam: 1) faith in Allah, 2) the performance of *salat* (formal prayer), 3) the observance of fasting, 4) the performance of the *Hajj* (journey to Mecca), and 5) the payment of *zakat* (alms). *Madrassas* (Islamic schools) have long been considered to be the center of traditional Islamic studies and the guardians of the orthodox Islam in Bangladesh.<sup>37</sup> Of these, there are two types: *Qomi madrassas* are private in nature, receive no financial support from the government, and subsist on religious endowments or *zakat* and donations from the faithful. *Alia madrassas*, by contrast, are controlled by the government, which pays 80 percent of the salaries of their teachers and staff, as well as considerable portion of their development budget. 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.<sup>38</sup> These schools constitute the main current of traditional Islam in Bangladeshi society.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The forty-year political history of Bangladesh is typified by an official embrace of—and accommodation with—Islam by a succession of ruling governments.

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 the government did not exile Islam from public life. Prime Minister Rahman (commonly known as “Mujib”) established Islamic foundations in Bangladesh under public patronage for the research and analysis of Islamic culture and society. Under his direction, Bangladesh also joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Beyond that, however, the practice of Islam in political form was severely circumscribed.

This balance was shattered in 1975 by a *coup d'état* that unseated Mujib and installed a military regime. Bangladesh's new rulers wasted no time dropping secularism from the constitution and inserting a proviso emphasizing “absolute trust and faith in Almighty *Allah*” as part of its efforts to satisfy religious constituents in society and the Islamic World. Simultaneously, the new government allowed Islamic parties, through 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.<sup>39</sup> After the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman in May 1981, power was assumed by another General, Hossein Mohammad Ershad, who established Islam as the state religion, ushering a period of relative religio-political stability.

In 1990, however, the Ershad regime was ousted as a result of a massive political revolt and purge, and power was assumed by Rahman's widow, Khaleda Zia, who 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 political party, only to be subsequently ousted by a coalition government with Khaleda Zia at its helm. In 2008, however, Sheikh Hasina returned to power, buoyed by her pledge "not to harm Islam." However, her government has unmistakably trended toward secularism, highlighting the contradiction between her election pledges and her actual performance.

Indeed, Islam is so intimately tied to Bangladeshi society that current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia were obliged to cover their heads for public appearances.<sup>40</sup> Although Khaleda Zia accommodated moderate Islamic forces in her ruling coalition, she did not compromise with *jihadists*. The country's present Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has reinforced secularism and generally sought to combat Islamist forces. In February 2009, her government passed two key pieces of legislation in this regard: the Money Laundering Prevention Act (MLPA) and the Anti-terrorism Act (ATA).<sup>41</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 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.<sup>42</sup> Under the statutes of the ATA, "Anyone resorting to murder, kidnapping or damaging property to create panic among the people and jeopardize the country's security by using explosives, arms and chemicals, will be charged with committing terrorist offence."<sup>43</sup> In tandem, the Hasina government's prosecution of "war criminals"—namely, those Bangladeshis who actively sided with Pakistan in attempting to prevent Bangladesh's independence—has effectively weakened Islamic forces, especially the JI.<sup>44</sup>

Troublingly, however, Sheikh Hasina has demonstrated 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 style Islamist group—as a strategy to win



the country's January 2007 election.<sup>45</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- [1] Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity and language in an Islamic Nation*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 56.
- [2] 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), 181.
- [3] Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, 56.
- [4] Muin-ud Diin Ahmad Khan, "Muslim Renaissance in Bangladesh : Pan Islamic and Khilafat Movement," in Ak. M Ayub Ali, M.A. Aziz & Shahed Ali eds., *Islam in Bangladesh Through Ages* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1995), 189.
- [5] The Kuwait based NGO Saudi Revival of Islamic Heritage (RIHS) is the main source of funding to the Ahle Hadith Bangladesh. See PROBE 9, iss. 14, September 24-30, 2010, <http://www.probenews-magazine.com>.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Mohsin, "The Ahl-I Hadis movement in Bangladesh," 179-182.
- [8] Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, 161-62.
- [9] M. Rashiduzzaman, "Islam, Muslim Identity and Nationalism in Bangladesh," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern studies* 18, no. 1 (1994), 54.
- [10] Ahmed Shafiqul Huque and Muhammad Yehia Akhter, "The Ubiquity of Islam: Religion and Society in Bangladesh" *Pacific Affairs* 60, no.2 (1987), 217.
- [11] Rashiduzzaman, "Islam, Muslim Identity and Nationalism in Bangladesh," 54.
- [12] Ishtiaq Hossain and Noore Alam Siddiquee, "Islam in Bangladesh: the role of the Ghulam Azam of Jamaat-i-Islami," *Inter Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004), 384.
- [13] As opposed to secular Bengali nationalism, the JI prefers Bangladeshi nationalism which recognizes the importance of Islam in national life. The JI, which claims to be a modern democratic Islamic political party, has been working to establish a liberal parliamentary system of democracy. See Zaglul Haider, "Role of Military in the Politics of Bangladesh: Mujib, Zia and Ershad Regimes (1972-1990)," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 22, no. 3 (1999), 74; Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism: The Case of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1995), 685; Bangladesh Jamaat-I Islami, Election Manifesto 2008, n.d., [http://www.Jamaat-i-Islami.org/index.php?option=com\\_archive&](http://www.Jamaat-i-Islami.org/index.php?option=com_archive&)
- [14] Hossain and Siddiquee, "Islam in Bangladesh," 384.
- [15] Zaglul Haider, "The Ninth General Election in Bangladesh: The Fall of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Rise of the Bangla-

desh Awami league” (unpublished research paper).

[16] The party supporters, workers and well-wishers working abroad regularly contribute to the party fund, whether monthly, annually or occasionally as part of their political and moral responsibilities. Author’s interviews with JI leaders and activists, Bangladesh, August 2006.

[17] Talukder Maniruzzaman, “Bangladesh Politics: Secular and Islamic Trends,” in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed., *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990), 84.

[18] Emajuddin Ahmad and D.R.J.A. Nazneen, “Islam in Bangladesh: Revivalism or Power politics?” *Asian Survey* 30, no.8 1990, 802.

[19] Summit Ganguly, “The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh” United States Institute of Peace *Special Report*, August 2006, [http://www.usip.org/files/resources/SRAug06\\_2.pdf](http://www.usip.org/files/resources/SRAug06_2.pdf).

[20] Bruce Vaughn, *Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 31, 2007), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS22591.pdf>.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] On October 17, 2005, Bangladesh’s government banned the activities of the HUIJB. See *Harkatul Jihad banned at last*. See , *The Daily Star* October 18, 2005 .Online: <<http://www.thedailystar.net/2005/10/18/d5101801033.htm>>

[23] “Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B),” South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d., <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/terroristoutfits/Huj.htm>.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibidem.*

[26] *Ibidem.*

[27] “Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh,” South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d., <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/terroristoutfits/JMB.htm>.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, “Understanding 12 extremist groups of Bangladesh,” *Observer India*, June 7, 2009, [http://www.observerindia.com/cms/export/orfonline/modules/analysis/attachments/Bangladesh-Militant-Groups\\_1246945884723.pdf](http://www.observerindia.com/cms/export/orfonline/modules/analysis/attachments/Bangladesh-Militant-Groups_1246945884723.pdf).

[30] “Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh,” South Asia Terrorism Portal.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Abdul Kalam Azad, “Six Militant Linchpins Hanged,” *New Age* (Dhaka), March 31, 2007, <http://www.newagebd.com/2007/mar/31/front.html>.

[33] BANBEIS, Bangladesh Bureau of educational, Information, And Statistics .Online: <[http://www.banbeis.gov.bd/bd\\_pro.htm](http://www.banbeis.gov.bd/bd_pro.htm)>

[34] For example, the international Sunni organization Khatma Nabuat continuously puts pressure on the government to declare the Ahama-

dya sect as non-Muslim.

[35] Rashiduzzaman, "Islam, Muslim Identity and Nationalism in Bangladesh," 36-60.

[36] Ahamed and Nazneen, "Islam In Bangladesh: Revivalism or Power politics?" 798.

[37] Mumtaz Ahmad, "Madrasa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh," in Satu P. Limaye, Mohan Malik and Robert G. Wirsing, eds., *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* (Honolulu, Hawaii: Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, 2004), 101.

[38] *Ibid.* 105.

[39] Zaglul Haider, *The Changing Pattern of Bangladesh Foreign policy: A Comparative study of the Mujib and Zia regimes*, (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2006), 204.

[40] Farah Deebea Chowdhury, "Problems of Women's Participation in Bangladesh Politics," *The Round Table* 98, iss. 404, 2009), 557.

[41] "10 Bills Sail Through Opposition Protest," *New Age* (Dhaka), February 25, 2009, <http://www.newagebd.com/2009/feb/25/front.html#1>.

[42] "Bangladesh Enacts Tough Anti-Terrorism Law," *Hindustan Times*, June 13, 2008, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Bangladesh-enacts-tough-anti-terrorism-law/Article1-317131.aspx>.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF Annual Report 2010 - *Additional Countries Closely Monitored: Bangladesh*, 29 April 2010, Online, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4be28407d.html>.

[45] Bruce Vaughn, *Bangladesh: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 2, 2007), 4, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33646.pdf>.