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Bangladesh: Rise of religious fundamentalist groups and nature of their relationship with the authorities (2005 - 2006)

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Background

Religious "extremism" has been on the rise in Bangladesh (AI 23 May 2006; Freedom House 6 July 2005; US May 2005, 124-125) since 2001 (Asia Times Online 4 Apr. 2006; Worldpress.org 29 Apr. 2005; HRWF 19 Sept. 2005). The number of "extremist" and "terrorist" incidents in 2004 is estimated to have exceeded the total number of such incidents over the previous five years (PINR 25 July 2006). Sources from 2005 and 2006 report numerous bombings (Freedom House 6 July 2005; *Hindustan Times* 10 Nov. 2005; AI 23 May 2006), assassinations (ibid.; BBC 20 Apr. 2006), and other violent acts, such as arson (AI 23 May 2006), attributed to Islamic "extremist" groups (ibid.; US May 2005, 124-125).

According to the *Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, "Bangladesh's high levels of political violence and instability have ... provided opportunities for religious and other extremists to expand their influence" (May 2005, 125). Widespread poverty and corruption are also thought to have encouraged "extremist tendencies" (*Hindustan Times* 10 Nov. 2005).

Recent examples of "extremist" activity are numerous. On 17 August 2005, hundreds of bombs were detonated across the country (AI 23 May 2006; BBC 20 Apr. 2006; *Hindustan Times* 10 Nov. 2005) within hours of each other (ibid.), killing three people and injuring roughly one hundred others (UNB 17 Oct. 2005; BBC 6 Mar. 2006a). Government buildings, courts, and journalists' associations were the main targets of the attacks (ibid. 17 Aug. 2005). An Islamic militant group, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), claimed responsibility for the bombings (ibid.; see also *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005* 28 Apr. 2006, Chapter 5 and BBC 20 Apr. 2006).

In general, militant "extremist" groups in Bangladesh have targeted secular intellectuals (PINR 27 July 2005; Lintner Spring 2004, 416; see also UNB 17 Oct. 2005 and US May 2005, 126), politicians (UNB 17 Oct. 2005; PINR 27 July 2005), judges (ACHR 23 Nov. 2005; *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005* 28 Apr. 2006, Chapter 5), police (ibid.), cultural groups (ibid.), journalists (*South China Morning Post* 19 Sept. 2005; Lintner Spring 2004, 416; PINR 27 July 2005), religious minorities (ibid.; IDMC 28 Mar. 2006; Lintner Spring 2004, 416; US May 2005, 125), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (ACHR 23 Nov. 2005, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005* 28 Apr. 2006, Chapter 5), and leftist activists (PINR 27 July 2005).

Militant groups

According to a Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) news article, since 2001, "local Islamic militant groups have grown in number, membership and organisation" (19 Sept. 2005). Sources claim that a link exists between Islamic militants and Islamic schools known as madrassas [also spelled "madrasas"] (US May 2005, 125; Jamestown Foundation 13 Jan. 2005, 6). According to sources, some militant groups recruit from the madrassas (Lintner Spring 2004, 422; Asia Times Online 4 Apr. 2006; ACHR 23 Nov. 2005), which have grown in number over recent years (ibid.; US May 2005, 125). From 1986 to 2005, the number of madrassas in Bangladesh is thought to have increased from approximately 4,000 (HRWF 19 Sept. 2005) to 64,000 (ibid.; ACHR 23 Nov. 2005). Several sources indicate that funding for madrassas and militant groups in Bangladesh has been provided by Islamic NGOs from the Middle East (Jamestown Foundation 13 Jan. 2005, 6; HRWF 19 Sept. 2005; Asia Times Online 4 Apr. 2006).

The sources consulted by the Research Directorate identify several key militant groups operating in Bangladesh. These include the Islamic "extremist" groups Jamaat-ul-[also spelled Jamatul, Jamiatul, Jama'atul] Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) (ibid.; BBC 17 Aug. 2005; *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 1.a; SATP n.d.a), the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) (ibid. n.d.b; BBC 6 Mar. 2006b), the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) (SATP n.d.c; Asia Times Online 4 Apr. 2006; Lintner Spring 2004, 416), and Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) (ibid., 419; SATP n.d.d). The Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP), a Maoist splinter organization, is also identified as a terrorist group (SATP n.d.e).

The main objective of radical Islamic organizations such as JMB, JMJB, HuJI, and ICS is reportedly to implement Islamic law in Bangladesh (Asia Times Online 4 Apr. 2006; SATP n.d.a; ibid. n.d.b; ibid. n.d.c; ibid. n.d.d). However, the PBCP, inspired by the Chinese revolution, has the objective of "capturing state power through armed struggle" (ibid. n.d.e). For a detailed description of each of these groups, their leadership, membership, and activities, please refer to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) Website at: <.

The influence of "extremist" groups is thought to be particularly strong in rural areas (Lintner Spring 2004, 416). According to an article in the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor*, Bangladesh's Chittagong region, in particular, has become a base for Islamic "extremist" groups (13 Jan. 2005, 6). The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) *World Refugee Survey 2006* also indicates that Rohingyas in the Chittagong region reportedly have had ties to certain Islamic groups, including HuJI (2006). Rohingyas are stateless Muslims from Arakan state in Myanmar (Burma) (Refugees International 15 Mar. 2003). There are over 20,000 Rohingyas living in refugee camps in Bangladesh (ibid.; USCRI 2006).

Relationship with the authorities

Since 2001, the government of Bangladesh has denied the existence of Islamic "extremism" in the country (*Time International Asia* 10 Apr. 2006; see also Worldpress.org 29 Apr. 2005). The Awami League, the main political opposition in Bangladesh, has reportedly accused the government of denying the growth of "extremism" because its coalition includes two Islamic political parties, Jamaat-i-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) (*Time International Asia* 10 Apr. 2006). Several sources consulted suggest that links may also exist between the two Islamic parties and Islamic militant groups (ACHR 23 Nov. 2005; CFR 29 Aug. 2005; PINR 27 July 2005; see also *The Daily Star* 25 Aug. 2005). According to a 25 August 2005 article in *The Daily Star*, a Dhaka-based newspaper, a number of militants arrested in Bangladesh indicated they were members, or had once been members, of either Jamaat-e-Islami or one of its

wings, such as ICS. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) identifies ICS, Jamaat-e-Islami's student wing (*The Daily Star* 25 Aug. 2005), as "part of a larger Islamist "extremist" network of the HuJI, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikyo Jote" (SATP n.d.d).

As a result of this alleged link between the government and militant groups, the police have refrained from arresting suspected militants (PINR 27 July 2005). According to the weekly review of the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR), "[t]here have been countless incidents in which Islamic extremists were apprehended, sometimes with arms and explosives, only to be released by the authorities" (7 Sept. 2005).

A 28 November 2005 Agence France-Presse (AFP) news article reports that Abu Hena, a lawmaker with the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP), was expelled from the BNP in November 2005 after blaming the party for the rise in Islamic "extremism." Hena stated that the "extremists" in Bangladesh "want to establish Allah's law" (AFP 28 Nov. 2005). He also warned that the "extremists" would "demolish courts, kill judges and those who frame laws" and claimed that some members of the BNP were sympathetic to their cause (ibid.).

Since 2005, however, there have been several reports of the government of Bangladesh taking action against Islamic militants (*The Daily Star* 24 Feb. 2005; UNB 17 Oct. 2005; BBC 29 May 2006; ibid. 26 Apr. 2006; ibid. 28 Feb. 2006; AI 23 May 2006). In February 2005, the government outlawed the JMB and JMBJ (ibid.; *The Daily Star* 24 Feb. 2005; UNB 17 Oct. 2005). HuJI was later outlawed in October 2005 (ibid.; see also *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005* 28 Apr. 2006, Chapter 5).

JMB's top leaders, Abdur Rahman and Siddiqui Islam, were arrested in March 2006 (BBC 26 Apr. 2006; ibid. 29 May 2006). The two were sentenced to death, along with five other JMB leaders, for their involvement in the murder of two judges in 2005 (ibid.).

As of April 2006, the government had arrested approximately 1,000 "suspected Islamic militants" in connection with the 17 August 2005 bombings (ibid. 26 Apr. 2006). Several militants were sentenced to life in prison (UNB 3 July 2006; ibid. 6 Mar. 2006) while others were sentenced to death for their involvement in the bombings (BBC 14 May 2006; ibid. 28 Feb. 2006).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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