



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

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Is Islamic fundamentalism a problem in Bangladesh? Do minority religions have equality?

The most recent *UK Home Office* report on Bangladesh, in a section titled “Abuses By Non Government Armed Groups” (paragraph 10.1) quotes from the subscription source “Jane’s Sentinel Security Risk Assessment” as follows:

“Islam has become an increasingly defining feature of Bangladeshi politics in recent years. One consequence of the rise of Islamic politics in Bangladesh has been a deterioration in the security environment. The former BNP-led government (2001-2006), which included the Bangladesh Islamic Conference (Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh: JIB) and the Coalition of Islamic Unity (Islami Oikya Jote: IOJ), came under pressure for its tacit support of radical Islamist groups such as the Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which was responsible for 459 near-simultaneous improvised explosive devices that detonated on 17 August 2005, killing two people and injuring more than 100 others. The judiciary was also targeted that year with attacks on courthouses in Gazipur and Chittagong, likely because they are symbols of secularity. The BNP belatedly began to crack down on the JMB. Although this created tensions with the JIB, the government succeeded in capturing and executing the leading operatives of the terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, in May 2007, three near-simultaneous bomb explosions struck three railway stations in three cities. The attacks were attributed to a new organisation called Zadid Al- Qaeda, which may be a regrouping of certain JMB activists. Although there have been no major attacks on the same scale as the 2005 blasts, and arrests of JMB leaders across the country continue, militancy remains a threat, particularly given that the BNP, the AL and the army remain politically unwilling to fully investigate the links between the various Bangladeshi militant groups and the former governing Islamic parties.” (UK Border Agency (Home Office) (20 August 2010) *Country of Origin Information Report: Bangladesh*)

See also paragraph 10.3 of this report which quotes from the subscription source “The Armed Conflict Database of the International Institute for Strategic Studies” as follows:

“Militants were responsible for a few small-scale incidents, including violent demonstrations on university campuses, and just one fatality during 2009. Eighty-six died in incidents not linked to militancy, 74 of them during the mutiny by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) border guards. However, despite this lull in the conflict, intelligence sources reported that Islamist organisations continued to operate and recruit throughout Bangladesh. There were arrests and continuous security operations throughout the year, including a hunt for Islamist militants’ bomb stores.” (ibid)

A report published by the *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* states:

“Since assuming office, the Awami League government has initiated a number of steps affecting freedom of religion or belief. The government's appointments and public statements have given increased confidence to members of religious minority communities and have put Islamist groups on the defensive. For example, in October 2009, President Zillur Rahman called publicly for inter-religious harmony as a means of combating religious extremism. President Rahman is the widower of the Awami League women's affairs secretary who was among the victims of a grenade attack by Islamist extremists in 2004. Despite opposition criticism, the government passed legislation that could lead to trials of pro-Pakistan Islamists implicated in war crimes during Bangladesh's 1971 war for independence, including former cabinet member and Jamaat-e-Islami leader Motiur Rahman Nizami. The government also welcomed recent court rulings restoring pro-secular provisions in Bangladesh's constitution. These rulings could provide a legal basis for banning existing Islamist political parties, even those that espouse achieving Islamist goals through democratic means.” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (29 April 2010) *USCIRF Annual Report 2010 - Additional Countries Closely Monitored: Bangladesh*)

A *BBC News* report states:

“A court in Bangladesh has sentenced five members of a banned Islamist militant group, Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh, to life imprisonment. They were convicted in connection with a series of bombings in the northern district of Bogra in 2005. The bombings were part of a nationwide series of attacks. Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, has not significantly been affected by militant violence - one reason why the bombings shook the entire nation. Although no one was killed in the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) Bogra bombings, several people were injured.” (BBC News (10 August 2010) *Five Bangladeshi militants sentenced to life in jail*)

An article published by the *Jamestown Foundation* states:

“Founded in 1998, the JMB is the largest extremist group in Bangladesh. The movement has expressed its opposition to democracy, socialism, secularism, cultural events, public entertainment and women's rights through hundreds of bombings within Bangladesh. Though banned in 2005, the movement is believed to still maintain ties with various Islamist groups in the country.” (Jamestown Foundation (Terrorism Monitor) (17 February 2011) *Al-Awlaki Recruits Bangladeshi Militants for Strike on the United States*)

The Introduction to an *International Crisis Group* report refers to the JMB as follows:

“When the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) detonated 500 synchronised bombs in all but one of Bangladesh's 64 districts on 17 August 2005, analysts warned that it was waging an Islamic revolution that could destabilise the country. Four and a half years on, JMB is a much weaker force due to the arrest of hundreds of its members and the execution of its original leadership council, but it remains a potent threat with a proven capacity to regenerate. Its past and likely present ties to Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), the organisation responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attack and for a foiled December 2009 plot to target embassies in Dhaka, reinforce that threat.” (International Crisis Group (1 March 2010) *The Threat From Jamaat-UI Mujahideen Bangladesh*, p.1)

In a section titled “Membership Strength” this report states:

“The loss of so many leaders and foot-soldiers after the crackdown means that JMB is unlikely to recover its pre-2005 size and strength. However the remaining cadres are committed and therefore dangerous. Most government officials agree that approximately 1,500 were arrested, but that only 550 of them had JMB links.¹³³ At the end of 2009, the RAB arrested twelve members of three different shuras, of which half were executed, 118 ehsars, 22 gayeri ehsars, nineteen potential suicide bombers and over 400 other cadres.¹³⁴ It is not known how many were released and returned to the organisation.” (ibid, p.16)

The Conclusion of this report states:

“JMB remains dangerous for Bangladesh and more proactive measures are needed to prevent it regrouping. The government should not let its guard down as it attends to other priorities. Despite the arrests made since late 2005 – especially those since October 2008 – JMB continues to actively recruit, train and raise funds. It proved in 2005 that it could survive the elimination of its leadership and heavy losses in its ranks. It can do so again. JMB’s current amir, Saidur Rahman, has proven far more elusive than expected, and powerful veterans Najmul and Sohel Mahfuz also remain at large.” (ibid, p.29)

A report published by the *South Asia Terrorism Portal* which comments on incidents during 2010 which involved alleged Islamic extremists states:

“Meanwhile, six fatalities, including three civilians and three militants, were recorded in as many Islamist extremism linked incidents in 2010. Three civilians were killed by the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel), in three incidents in February. The civilians were killed in Dhaka (2) and Rajshahi (1) Districts. The three militants were killed in Chittagong (2) and Nawabganj (1) Districts in three separate incidents in the months of February (1) and April (2). There were no such fatalities in 2009. Indeed, it was after a span of two years that the SFs killed militants involved in Islamist extremism, even as Islamist extremist formations appear to have withdrawn into a defensive shell after the arrest, trial and conviction (and including the execution) of many of their top leadership. It would, however, be far from accurate to suggest that Islamist extremism has been wiped out from the country. Significantly, Maulana Saidur Rahman aka Zafar, chief of the Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), who was arrested on May 25, 2010, disclosed that the JMB had about 400 full-time cadres across the country and a ‘military wing’ capable of launching major attacks. He also claimed that hardliners who had taken control of the JMB would be more destructive as a result of his absence as chief. Further, he disclosed that Sohel Mahfuz had become JMB’s ‘acting chief’ and Nazmul Anwar Alam aka Bhagina Shahid was its ‘military wing commander’. [Police, however, believe that Alam was the ‘acting chief’ of the JMB]. Rahman also disclosed that, apart from the fake currency trade, JMB received funds from several sources at home and abroad. Rahman also admitted that the JMB has several hundred explosive devices, handmade bombs and grenades stashed at different locations.” (South Asia Terrorism Portal (2011) *Bangladesh Assessment 2011*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response

is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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