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Rising Islamism in Bangladesh is a European concern too

Recognizing the steadily declining political, human rights and security conditions in Bangladesh, on June 7, 2016, the European Parliament (EP) in Strasbourg [held a debate](#) on the current situation in the South Asian country. During the [lively discourse](#), several different views were put forth by members of the European Parliament (MEPs) regarding the causes and consequences of the deterioration of the societal and political space, foremost through rising Islamism, intolerance, political radicalization in the country. Considering these different views and opinions it should not come by surprise that there were also [different suggestions](#) made as to what should be the next steps by the parliament, and what kind of political action is expected in Europe from Bangladesh political elites in general and the government in particular. Despite varying opinions on what to do, MEPs agree the current political trajectory one may observe in Bangladesh is deeply worrying.

There are severe concerns among some MEPs that the current political environment is harmful to the envisaged development goals, especially with regard to the social and economic aim to lift people out of poverty and for Bangladesh to become a middle-income country by 2021. Furthermore, the unrestricted, extremely

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violent political struggle between the two leading political parties Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is antithetical to the hopes, expectations and collective concerns expressed in 'Bangladesh debates' of the EP during the recent years (earlier debates were held on 21 November 2013, 14 March 2013, 16 January 2014, 18 September 2014 and 24 November 2015). Without any question, these are very disturbing developments: starting with the controversial 2014 national polls, the deconstructive electoral behaviour of the opposition -which found its most visible expression in the boycott of the election-, the brutal murdering of members of religious minority communities and target killings of free, secular intellectual thinkers and writers. In fact, most of these actions are conducted by militant Islamist groups at the expense of the most vulnerable ones in Bangladeshi society. A dramatic political trajectory, that was already discussed in the EP last November, resulted in the "[Call on the Bangladeshi authorities](#) to consider specific initiatives to prevent the recurrence of attacks against writers and activists not only by the provision of particular physical protections to those who are potential targets for violence, but also by opening public debates challenging extremist views of all kinds". Evidently, not much has changed and the number of target killings by Islamist militants continues to rise.

Subsequently, during the latest discussion, the MEPs emphasized that the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) must do all they can to avoid further violence and launch immediate action against terrorist groups. Against this backdrop, one of the GoB primary roles is to ensure that the country's political-administrative institutions and respective authorities enforce the rule of law and fully ensure protection and safety of all citizens. They must restore tolerance, ensure safe access to spaces for public political debates, ensure freedom of expression as a fundamental human right, and promote respect. However, a prerequisite for this is that the whole political-institutional structure gets depoliticized.

Having said this, some MEPs also noted that the GoB systematically refuses to acknowledge the presence of Islamic State (IS/ISIS/Daesh) and Al Qaeda in

Bangladesh despite the fact that these groups claimed responsibility for multiple recent killings. They criticised certain parts of the political elites who'd rather opt "to use these atrocious killings for electoral purposes instead of protecting activists and vulnerable groups like [LGBT](#)" or religious minorities. However, it is of utmost importance that the GoB "acknowledge the risks of this radicalism, including possibly the risks posed by ISIS".

Some MEPs are also aware that while Islamic fundamentalism and militancy is nothing new in Bangladesh, it only recently became news by the actions of terror groups such as Al Qaeda or ISIS. During the debate, it was mentioned that the Jamaat-e-Islami (or just Jamaat) Bangladesh was rightly banned in 1971, mainly for war crimes during the liberation struggle and its persistent ideological campaign and terrorist attacks against the newly founded independent, secular state of Bangladesh. MEPs also found that the Jamaat -after the ban was lifted in 1979- maintained "links to extremist jihadist groups". Being aware of the political linkages between Jamaat (as well as other Islamist organizations) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), various MEPs demanded "to end and denounce its [BNP] links with them [militant Islamists] so that it can fulfil its proper secular democratic role in opposition".

In sum, the GoB must understand that "the European Union needs a Bangladesh where core universal human rights values are upheld." It is obvious that more could be done by the state to protect its citizens in recent years and in the future. As such, substantial efforts are necessary to avoid that the country "descends into full –blown violence and turns into a "regional stronghold for terrorism." However, the EP is also aware that constructive support rather than sanctions, words of criticism and condemnation is the best way forward. Therefore, it is in favour of a 'political dialogue'. Nevertheless, in the future the GoB should expect stronger responses from Europe urging the GoB to take a more active approach in countering violent

extremism, to assist in deradicalisation, and restore the country's path to democratisation and secularism.

Overall, it is clear this debate in the EP was long overdue, Bangladesh is in urgent need of national social and political consensus to restore democracy, human rights, freedom of expression and political liberties. Up until now, it seems that the rising threat is accompanied by a growing culture of apathy towards the [radicalization and Islamisation of Bangladesh's](#) state and society, this does not only affect people with low income but also the middle class. The fact that some of Bangladesh's political parties, like the BNP and extremist 'Jamaat-e-Islami' (both maintain [close ties](#) to each other), occupy more than just a [soft corner for Islamic extremism](#) is an additional hurdle to guarantee and protect pluralism, liberal norms and values; this is most unfortunate for the country's democratic consolidation. The latest wave of Jihadist violence gained momentum with the killing of the Italian aid worker [Cesare Tavella](#) in the high security diplomatic area of Dhaka and demonstrates that terrorists are increasing their range but it also shows a tectonic shift in the Islamist landscape in the country. This malicious assassination is the first attack by the [Islamic State \(IS\)](#) activists and followers of a whole series (which is still ongoing and [killed nearly 30 secular writers](#)) and emphasizes that [global Jihad is taking root in Bangladesh](#). Having this in mind, the GoB's traditional strategy of ignoring or downplaying the Islamist threat is not only naive but also short-sighted. In contrast, the GoB should focus on the current and future impact these developments have and Bangladesh has to prepare for an intensification of IS or Al Qaeda engagement.

Most importantly, the government and the security agencies need a comprehensive strategy to counter the domestic and global militant Islamist threat. However, it appears this is not a priority for the government and there are no effective visible signs of a developing strategy.

One may discern two explanations for this: Firstly, the country's [difficult civil-military relations](#) due to the [personalized decision-making procedures](#) of security related matters by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. In this context, the establishment of an institutionalized relationship with the armed forces is essential. At the moment it seems that PM Sheikh Hasina, the parliament and administration lack both the political will to introduce a new mechanism and the power/capacities to implement them (like functional and effective committees for civilian control, properly equipped and staffed/skilled ministries). Secondly, another major roadblock to the implementation of a successful counter-terrorism concept, are the difficult relations between and within the different security agencies. As a result, Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies are unable to pursue (even if they wanted to) tackling Islamic State networks with full force.

In order to solve the above mentioned institutional roadblocks, Bangladesh's decision-makers have to recognise that the costs of ignoring Jihadism is much higher pursuing narrow political ends and electoral benefits from radicalized sections of the country's electorate. Furthermore, the troubled religious minorities, 'western targets' and society as the whole will eventually pay the price.

Having said this, the latest debate in the EP on Bangladesh is a warning and express concerns but also an offer of 'supportive social and political dialogue' to the GoB, to tackle the challenge of rising Jihadism and radicalization. This is an important step because western intelligence network '[Five-Eyes](#)' expressed its unhappiness about the way shared intelligence was used by the GoB. The government and its security sector agents faced two accusations: Firstly, by human rights organisation (like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) who are stating that Bangladesh's security agents are involved in human rights violations. Secondly, and closely linked with the previous claim, accusations that the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), namely Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League (AL) administration, use foreign intelligence for political purposes. However, it seems that due to the tremendous international critic on the

deteriorating political and security situation in the country, the GoB is finally facilitating substantial campaigns against the Jihadists. In the past weeks, Bangladesh's authorities carried out a [major crackdown](#), leading to arrest of more than 11,000 people. The way in which these anti-terror operations were conducted was rather imprudent; instead of mass detentions, a subtler approach with clear investigation processes should be the way forward. Otherwise, the former and current claims that the current GoB is using anti-terror measures to keep the opposition in check will endure. However, it is interesting to note that the current campaign of the law enforcing agencies is similar to the '[Operation Clean Heart](#)' conducted by the then BNP government (today's opposition) in October 2002. The campaign's aims were to crack down on criminal networks and subsequently arrest criminals, recover illegal arms, and improve the state of law and order in Bangladesh. Besides these official goals, it is obvious that also [terrorists got into the focus](#) of the armed forces; the Operation Clean Heart faced similar critique, namely that the primary goal is the repression of the opposition rather than the reduction of crime. Furthermore, the European Parliament expressed concerns in the aftermath of 'Operation Clean Heart'. The MEPs not only criticized the operation on the basis of human rights violations but also expressed concerns about the growing levels of Islamic radicalization since the BNP-led alliance came to power.

Finally, it's time for Bangladesh to develop a coherent and stringent strategy against religious fundamentalism and Islamist militancy. Until recently, the few measures carried out by the current government to contain the Jihadist threats remain ineffective, especially if one observes the Islamists' capacity to mobilise support and the on-going operations of ['officially' banned organisations](#). In order to stop this threat, as demanded by Europe, it is crucial that the government achieves collective national consensus accompanied by stringent engagement of all democratic and secular forces. Last but not least, Bangladesh political decision-makers must overcome their 'state of denial' and finally enforce expeditious

prosecution, ending the culture of impunity on militant religious extremism; as long as this is not achieved, Bangladesh risks falling even deeper in the clutches of Islamic fundamentalism and becomes an easy target for IS and its affiliates.

