



SADF FOCUS

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Crackdown on Islamists: Bangladesh's New Campaign against Jihadi Terror in Perspective

Earlier this month, Bangladesh's security forces carried out a [nationwide crackdown](#) on radical Islamists in the country. The main part of the campaign ran over several days and included interventions by thousands of police and paramilitary personal, led to the arrest of more than 11,300 people.

This security operation has to be understood in light of rising international and domestic critic regarding the apparent inaction by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) as a [wave of brutal assassinations](#) flooded the country. The [victims were](#) secular and liberal writers and thinkers (especially bloggers), university professors, foreign aid workers, gay rights activists and religious minorities such as Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and members of the Shiite community. Subsequently, many observers were wondering if the current GoB is capable of protecting the fundamental rights -and the lives- of its citizens. However, the Sheikh Hasina's administration reacted and initiated a massive [clampdown](#) in an attempt to contain and eliminate of the Islamist threat.

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Nevertheless, critique persists and as the government was accused of using the counter-terrorism campaign to keep the opposition in check. Furthermore, some analysts were questioning the performance during the crackdown, which -while it led to a large numbers of arrests- only targeted a few (approximately 150) concrete radical Islamist subjects. Most of the targeted groups were lower rank members of Islamist organisations and [petty criminals](#); but top Jihadists were largely spared by the raids. Against this backdrop, the [police stated](#) that “none of those arrested is believed to be a high-level operator who might have organized or ordered attacks”. Therefore, it would be naïve to think the Islamist threat is under control now; in contrast, one should rather expect harsh reaction by the Islamists who want to show their still available capacities. Subsequently, despite the fact that the crackdown led to many arrest, many in Bangladesh -especially [independent intellectuals](#)- are still anxious that the religious fanatics will continue to terrorize them and society in their aim to turn the country into a Jihadist hub.

These developments and fears come with several questions that are need answers: How this could happen? In other words, what are the political reasons for this tremendous rise of Jihadism in Bangladesh and, more importantly, what can be done to ensure that Bangladeshi secularism and democratic values are protected?

First of all, there is an unfortunate political culture, which is characterized by extraordinary polarisation, hostility, and politics of revenge between the two major political parties, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This results in political actors who view democracy as a [zero-sum game](#) marked by a destructive ‘[tit-for-tat](#)’ strategy in order to achieve partisan objectives which are prioritized over national concerns. In this context, it is not just the political institutions and society that are highly politicised but also the whole governmental machinery. Appointments in politics and in the administration are based more on loyalty, obedience, obeisance, charisma, and kinship, rather than on performance, merits, and skills. As a result, many of the state agencies

remain ineffective or absent in rural/remote areas, they are just another nail in the coffin of already poor and stagnating governance; this enabled endemic corruption to spread like a wildfire. In addition to the undemocratic nature, unprofessional practice and behaviour of political parties contributes to the overall appearance of instability. [Political parties](#) have a weak organizational structure, lack internal democracy and any code of ethics; they also suffered from a high degree of intra-party factional feuds leading to numerous fissions (and fusions) in the past. Excessive personal leadership cult, dynastic rule, [patron-client relations \(clientelism\)](#), as well as politics of patronage further characterise the country's flawed polity. At the same time, the criminalization of politics, the widespread use of violence, and the fact that coercion is seen as an acceptable mode of governance are further dragging down the political culture. Subsequently, politicians rely on musclemen ([mastaans/goondas](#)) to achieve goals in an unrestricted struggle for power; as such, one can state that in Bangladesh [radicalization and institutional dysfunction are interrelated](#).

Another important feature of Bangladesh's unstable political climate is the tense [civil-military relationship](#), which led to polarisation, [factionalism](#), indirect militarization of politics and direct military rule. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the people lack confidence in the political leadership who continuously implemented [a highly centralized and personalised decision-making style](#) and fail to maintain a balance of power between politicians and general public. The public is seen as an instrument to outbid the political enemy. These attitudes are significant, as there is no [constructive working relationship](#) between the government and opposition; which means parliament loses its value of a place for political debate as the sessions are either one-sided or paralyzed. Instead, in order to ventilate grievances, politics takes to the streets, especially by calling '[hartals](#)' ([general strikes](#)) with detrimental ramifications for the already deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

In addition to these internal political factors, external factors play a huge role in the rise of the Islamists. One of the most significant roles is played by Middle East countries, especially through financial support and other economic benefits for (Sunni) Islamists. Other important external factors that explain the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh are the Iranian revolution (as inspiration for a global Islamist movement, mostly for the Shia stream), the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the emergence of the Taliban movement (including numerous Bangladeshi fighters as well) and regime in Afghanistan, the fall and subsequent resurgence of the Afghan Taliban as well as the fight against the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the role of Pakistan in state-support for terrorism abroad, and, last but not least, the troubled relations of Bangladesh with India and Myanmar/Burma and the ‘proxy-war’ between Pakistan and India. The most important ‘foreign influence’, pulling Bangladeshi society into the scope of Islamist fanaticism, is the increasing impact of international Jihadist groups, namely Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda’s [South Asian chapter ‘Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent \(AQIS\)’](#); including AQIS affiliates in Bangladesh, Ansar al-Islam.

In this context, one must state that IS operatives have been [residing in Bangladesh](#) for a long time. Until recently, it seemed that IS used Bangladesh as a place to recruit and train its fighters and did not actively pursue a terrorist agenda. However, this does not mean [that IS does not identify Bangladesh as a target](#). By analysing Islamic States strategies to gain a foothold in other countries in the region -like Pakistan and Afghanistan- one should expect that IS (like Al Qaeda) is already building alliances with local Islamic fundamentalist groups in South Asia, like [Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh \(JeB\)](#), or [Hifazet-e-Islam](#). These groups will function as proxies until IS is strong enough to take over the militant activities directly. Unfortunately, it seems that the currently extremely ‘tensed’ political atmosphere and poor socio-economic conditions in Bangladesh are favouring the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and most of the international Jihadist organisations consider the country a new sanctuary.

Due to a [political alliance with the BNP](#), the Islamist political front organizations, foremost Jatiya Party (Naziur faction, or JP-N), the Islamic Oikyo Jote (IOJ), and JeB became a part of the government and involved themselves in the country's politics gaining key positions in the institutional structure. The presence of Islamist parties in the political power structure, and their specific policies, especially their anti-Indian, pro-Pakistan, and pro-Islamic policy, provided opportunities for the growth of Islamic militancy. Against this backdrop, political patronage, the granting of impunity, militants felt increasingly encouraged to carry out their '[Islamisation](#)' campaign by violent means, especially the rural areas have been heavily affected. In earlier years it was commonly understood that Islamic propaganda and action were confined to urban centres, because people on the country side were more concerned with the daily life challenges than supporting religious fundamentalism. Today on the other hand, there is evidence that because of the deterioration of living conditions, people are successfully targeted by Islamist recruiters. Furthermore, due to the use of force and the patronage from local authorities, people in remote areas lack protection from militant Islamists' campaigns, are forced to accept their influence and to follow their fundamentalist directives. Consequently, religious fundamentalists gain leverage and support in both rural and urban areas, due to support from Islamists and Islamists-friendly political parties. Additionally, the [whole Islamist movement](#) (including political parliamentary and extra-parliamentary militant components) was able to get a foothold in all government departments as well as in the societal institutional structures. In sum, the fundamentalists have developed a strong network to gain and maintain power in order to carry out an Islamist revolution. One can state that the Islamists are following two related strategies: First, they try to undermine the political system from within by using the opportunities offered in a democratic process, which can be described as the formal 'political front' ([Islamist political groups/political parties](#)) of the fundamentalist movement. Second, they build up of an informal, extra-constitutional 'militant front' ([Islamist militant groups/movement organizations](#)) to solidify their influence nationwide. This finds its expression in the use of physical violence, armed

confrontation, and other extra-judicial measures. Both strategies –political and militant– are aimed at achieving their goal of establishing an Islamic state based on a narrow interpretation of Islam. One has to be aware, that this includes the elimination of democracy, the rejection of secularism, human rights, and all other fundamental rights in Bangladesh.

Having said this, Bangladesh needs more than just sporadic, large scale police actions, especially if these lack prudence and proper strategic planning. The country needs a coherent and comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy which includes a political solution to eradicate the conditions that favour the rise of religious fanatics. By observing the political trajectories and patterns of politics in Bangladesh, there is only one feasible solution: A sustainable rapprochement between the two [hostile political leaders](#) Sheikh Hasina (AL) and Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP) to build a constructive political dialogue and establish a working relationship between government and opposition as well as to end the disastrous extra-parliamentary activities that undermine the work of the GoB. The military formerly proposed the idea of the ‘minus-two formula’, meaning that both leaders have to leave the country, but such an option would rather enforce the political conflict than calm it down.

Otherwise, the debate on removing the constitutional provision recognising [Islam as the official religion](#) earlier this year was without a doubt a step in the right direction. The fact that Bangladesh's High Court on Monday, March 28, rejected a respective petition, was unfortunate for Bangladesh's transition towards liberal democracy, for several reasons: Firstly, it's against the spirit of the constitution which favours secularism. Secondly, to grant a certain belief the status of state religion undermines the freedom of religion and expression, and contradicts the notion of liberal democracy. Thirdly, the way in which the petition got rejected is against any rules and procedures in democratic governance. Within minutes, the petition got rejected and without giving the petitioners a change to make their

case. Fourthly, the judgement provides ideational and judicial cover for further Islamisation of state and society, at the expense of the political leverage of secular forces. In sum, this decision of the highest court of Bangladesh will help to [boost Islamism](#) and Jihadi ideology in the country. Another essential part of a political solution is that the BNP must be forced to cut its ties with JeB. [Democracy cannot prevail if political parties](#), whose agenda it is to erode democracy, are at the forefront of formal and informal decision-making processes.

As Bangladesh works towards a political solution for their 'Islamism problem' the international community could play and especially the EU could play an important role. The EU should help to foster a dialogue between AL and BNP to work out a national consensus and create opportunities for a more [inclusive politics to end violent radicalization](#). The dialogue should revolve around putting an end to the disruptive and stifling violence, guaranteeing human rights, protecting all citizens, and ending the deadlock/generate trust and room for cooperation in order to re-establish secular democratic norms and principles.

Last but not least, [SADF in Brussels](#), "urges external donors (NGOs and/or non-EU countries) to re-evaluate and monitor their flow of financial aid, development and assistance to Bangladesh so that it is not misused by the JeI [JeB] and its auxiliaries to augment their hazardous extremist impact on political life and secularism in Bangladesh".