



**RESOLVE**  
NETWORK

# **Bangladesh and Violent Extremism:**

RESOLVE Network Research  
2016-2017

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For more information about RESOLVE, our partners, and our research across Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, please visit our website at [www.resolvenet.org](http://www.resolvenet.org) and follow the discussion on Twitter @resolvenet.



# COMPENDIUM CONTENTS

BANGLADESH AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM .....	1
BANGLADESH ON THE BRINK.....	7
THE LANGUAGE OF YOUTH POLITICS IN BANGLADESH.....	37
CAN COMMUNITY POLICING HELP COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH? .....	55
DEMOCRACY AND SHARIA IN BANGLADESH.....	77
ISLAMIST MILITANCY IN BANGLADESH.....	101
BANGLADESH AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM: FACT SHEET SERIES.....	119
FACT SHEET: BANGLADESH ON THE BRINK .....	121
FACT SHEET: LANGUAGE OF YOUTH POLITICS .....	123
FACT SHEET: COMMUNITY POLICING .....	125
FACT SHEET: DEMOCRACY AND SHARIA .....	127
FACT SHEET: ISLAMIST MILITANCY .....	129



# Bangladesh and Violent Extremism: Looking Forward

## Observations from RESOLVE Network Research

*Bethany L. McGann*

Bangladesh's interrelated and complex drivers of political and low-level violence remain of concern to Bangladeshis and international policymakers alike.

In 2017, the Secretariat for the Researching Solutions to Violent Extremism (RESOLVE) Network engaged in a mixed-methods study, with the goal of teasing apart individual, social, and political dynamics contributing to persistent and emerging drivers of violence in Bangladesh. RESOLVE's research sought to contribute to the growing body of literature on Bangladesh and violent extremism, where anecdotal indications suggest that the perceived increase in vulnerability to violent extremism and resonance of anti-secular narratives is driven by both external and internal factors.

RESOLVE's research model is committed to substantively including the expertise of international, regional, and local stakeholders in research design; elevating the capacity and knowledge of local researchers; and communicating findings to researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and constituent communities impacted by violent extremism in Bangladesh and around the world. As a pilot effort for RESOLVE Network research design and implementation, we sought to gain insights and new data on hypothesized external and internal conflict drivers, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. RESOLVE engaged four Bangladeshi researchers to conduct on-the-ground research activities, including key-informant interviews, focus groups, statistical analysis, and desk research. The scholars were paired with three principal investigators with deep expertise in South Asia and quantitative and qualitative methods. Our quantitative efforts supported a countrywide baseline survey of attitudes on religious identity, citizenship, and political legitimacy, conducted in partnership with a local enumeration firm.

In parallel, our qualitative activities focused on youth and student populations on public and private university campuses, as well as local-level police units that are often the first to be contacted before and after political or extremist violence erupts. In marrying both methodologies in the same project, RESOLVE aimed to produce data and analysis useful for short- and long-term programming and further research efforts. RESOLVE ultimately found that with limited hard data and locally substantiated findings, efforts to counter violent extremism, in particular, run the risk of inflaming existing tensions or further

complicating the troubled environment.

## RESEARCH CONSTRAINTS IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

### Primary Constraints

The project exposed the operational and environmental challenges of engaging in research on the dynamics of violent extremism in societies at the fulcrum point of vulnerability and resilience. Barriers to open and free discourse on contentious issues of religious identity and societal grievances can seriously undermine the ability of researchers, academics, and others investigating conflict drivers to operate, analyze, and report their findings. There is significant danger in the act of inserting oneself, as a passive observer or active questioner, in spaces that are politically tense or in spaces that are subject to institutional or departmental territoriality. Researchers engaging in regular scholarly investigation, as well as those asking sensitive questions about sources of vulnerability or resilience — whether related to actions by government or nongovernmental entities — are increasingly at risk. In 2017 alone, human rights and academic freedom organizations reported that over 80 individuals (journalists, political affiliates, scholars, civil society activists, and others) were victims of kidnappings and forced disappearances.<sup>1</sup>

### Secondary Constraints

A related secondary constraint was an observable reluctance of certain populations to engage in nuanced discussion of the drivers of conflict as it manifests itself in Bangladesh. Individuals consistently cited the contested narratives surrounding Bangladesh's 1971 independence as a main driver of ongoing tensions across the country, rather than the more contentious and contemporary challenges that research suggests may more accurately explain the recent surge in political and extremist violence.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, the explicit mention of those sources of conflict met with defensive denials. Unfortunately, the refusal to acknowledge the contentious sources of contemporary conflict drivers is likely to limit the effectiveness of engagement and intervention strategies designed by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

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1 Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: Investigate Fate of 'Disappeared'," January 26, 2018.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/26/bangladesh-investigate-fate-disappeared>.

2 International Crisis Group, "Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh," South Asia Journal, February 2018.



# THE PROBLEM WITH PERCEPTIONS, THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

Four main conflict vectors emerged from the conversations we had with local-level actors impacted by or engaged in efforts to address conflict and violent extremism:

- Emergence of militant groups affiliated with, or directly supported by, international terrorist organizations
- Radicalization, particularly among college-educated and middle- and upper-class demographic groups
- Rising tensions over religious and ethnic identities, despite the secularist narratives promoted by the governing political party and enshrined in the Bangladeshi constitution
- Deepening grievances related to service provision and institutional capacity, as well as to human rights abuses conducted in pursuit of counterterrorism goals.

The Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July 2016 sent shock waves across Bangladesh;<sup>3</sup> it was the first time that foreigners and expatriates were specifically targeted in a deadly assault that was widely viewed as having its roots in violent extremism. This attack came in the wake of a period characterized by assaults and murders conducted by militant groups, including those targeting secular bloggers, the LGBTQ community, and religious and ethnic minorities. During discussions with RESOLVE representatives, several government and civil society interlocutors described the attacks as a “wake up call” for the country, illuminating the danger of globally informed violent extremist narratives that resonate with domestic actors harboring militant dispositions. In several instances, local stakeholders suggested that the upper-middle class and university-educated backgrounds of several leading perpetrators indicated a potential and disturbing new trend in violent extremist group recruitment.

Regardless of evidentiary support, public perceptions around the identity of the Holey Artisan attackers precipitated a mix of responses from the Bangladeshi government that included casting blame on groups perceived as opposition, as well as greater reliance on hardline security measures. Indiscriminate military-led responses to suspected violent extremists can intensify grievances within the population, as suggested by survey responses in “Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh and Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh.”<sup>4</sup>

Although the majority of Bangladeshis surveyed during the RESOLVE Network study supported the principles of democratic governance, significant levels of support for incorporating Shariah tenets into government policies and practice were prevalent — particularly in relation to augmenting justice provision and reducing corruption. This support could indicate an indictment of current perceptions of weakness in government institutions, which may be driving grievances in the certain segments of the population.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ali Riaz and Syeda Salina Aziz, “Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh: Surveying Support,” RESOLVE Network Bangladesh Research Brief No. 3, September 2017. Included on page \_\_\_ of this compendium.

Additionally, while radicalization and violent extremism are issues discussed at the national level, ordinary Bangladeshis do not seem to have a deep understanding of, or significant knowledge about, the drivers of extremism, or how the current political climate may be influencing the emergence of extremism. Interestingly, the studies in this compendium revealed a tendency to conflate violent extremism with political violence or to view it as a repackaged manifestation of certain forms of political violence.

Although the Holey Artisan attack illuminated the possibility that Bangladeshi youth are a particularly vulnerable demographic group, assumptions about employment status and identity — as opposed to other dynamics within the youth population — drove much of the early counter violent extremism (CVE) interventions funded by international donors and implemented by local stakeholders. For example, although access to employment is a significant issue, one local practitioner suggested that a key factor driving unemployment may be the quality of higher education in Bangladesh. Students can have several degrees but remain functionally unemployable. CVE interventions focused on employment that are not sensitive to the pervasive barriers that hinder youth from obtaining jobs may prove futile in preventing and countering violent extremist sentiments and support. Until more robust research is conducted in this and other areas, the best available evidence around growing support for violent extremism in Bangladesh remains anecdotal, limiting the development of more locally tailored and effective CVE policies and practices.

# EVOLVING DYNAMICS AND FUTURE TRENDS TO FOLLOW

In the coming months and years, the Bangladeshi government's ability to effectively prevent and counter violent extremism will be critical for the country's development trajectory and overall stability, which will need to progress against the backdrop of several other competing national-level priorities.

**Governance.** Bangladesh's laudable economic growth over the past decade has attracted an array of regional and international actors with strong interests in supporting industrial activity, inclusive governance, and civil institutions. However, this energy is tempered by the difficulties operating in a highly politicized environment, an increasingly fragile institutional infrastructure at the national level, and endemic corruption at the local level.

**Humanitarian Crises.** Since RESOLVE's initiated work in late 2016, the Rohingya crisis has dramatically escalated; more than 600,000 additional persons fled Rakhine state into Bangladesh since August 2017. As state-to-state efforts to address the issue of repatriation and humanitarian assistance remain strained, the status of refugees and lack of a long-term plan for their resettlement present a growing danger of inter- and intra-communal grievances. These tensions could contribute to vulnerability to violent extremist narratives in impacted and sympathetic populations across Bangladesh.

**Elections.** On the cusp of national elections, tensions between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – traditionally the two main contenders in Bangladeshi elections — can be expected to heighten as the parties jockey for support and legitimacy. Of greatest concern in the lead-up to elections is the impact of the Islamist group Hefazat e-Islami, which has more than one million constituents across the country. Recent mobilization in support of more Islamic education, separation of genders, and calls for prosecution and violence against secular practices in Dhaka resulted in several deaths as Hefazat protestors faced off against security forces.<sup>5</sup> Although the Awami League government has made efforts to appease Hefazat's demands—as articulated in their Quran-inspired “13 Points<sup>6</sup>” — it remains to be seen how rising Islamist influence will play out in 2019, particularly as relates to governance and public policy. Of equal concern might be the long term impact on Bangladesh's reputation for moderate Islam and secular democracy. Hefazat's willingness to engage in violence against government forces, as well as to promote violence against bloggers, atheists, religious minorities, and others considered to be an offense to Islam, contribute to a realistic concern for the reemergence of domestic militancy and violent extremist organizations.

In light of the complex challenges in identifying, understanding, and creating space to address the sources of conflict in Bangladesh, RESOLVE's research focused on several areas in which policymakers and practitioners can contribute to and support the country's efforts to reduce violence and increase resilience to potential violent extremist narratives and actors.

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<sup>5</sup> BBC News, “Riot Police Battle Islamists in Dhaka Bangladesh,” May 5, 2013.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22418379>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- **Narratives.** Understanding the role that narratives surrounding religion, secularism, and public life play in fostering or mitigating social polarization and violent extremism among youth is key to effective programming. The extent to which alternative narrative campaigns are effective depends, in large part, on the degree to which they are informed by rigorous research and insight into the views driving existing schisms within local Bangladeshi communities today. Locally crafted and delivered counternarrative campaigns might prove more effective, given the credibility and deep contextual insight local communities and actors have to contribute to such efforts.
- **Policing.** Security forces should be trained and encouraged to view communities as active and trusted partners with whom to share information on goals and objectives. Fostering an ethos among security forces in which communities are viewed and treated as partners, not suspects, can help reduce grievances associated with the role and actions of security actors, which can otherwise arise if communities perceive that they are being treated only as a source of intelligence. Advancing a community policing model that promotes community-police cooperation, shared respect, and protection from retaliation can encourage both communities and police to more actively work together to address emerging violent extremist threats. To do so, current community policing models need to be altered to focus more on actions and results and less on ceremonial functions. The existing community policing apparatus also needs to be better integrated with other security agencies that are more directly engaged with countering violent extremism and terrorism nation-wide.
- **Governance.** Findings from RESOLVE’s research indicate that Bangladeshis unequivocally support the principles and values of democratic governance and need to see those values reflected in their interactions with state and party apparatuses. However, our research indicated that the perceived gap between the theory and practice of democracy is encouraging citizens to look for alternatives to promote good governance, prevent corruption, and limit partisanship. Efforts to augment the rule of law and address issues of concern to citizens will be crucial moving forward to ensure that citizens feel safe, secure, and fully represented by their government bodies.
- **Community Perceptions.** Understanding the context in which the local population perceives the goals and activities of militant groups is key to unearthing the roots of popular support for these groups. Although low across the board, indicators of empathy or support are largely correlated to weakness in criminal justice, policing, and community security. Among Bangladeshi supporters of militant groups, women represent a significant proportion, as do individuals in the middle and upper socioeconomic levels. Understanding the resonance of militant narratives, tactics, and goals among these constituencies is critical to the ability to design and implement responsive interventions.

The following mapping paper; research briefs, coauthored by our 2017 RESOLVE Network Research Fellows and Principal Investigators; and associated factsheets elaborate more fully on findings from RESOLVE’s 2016-2017 Research Initiative on the drivers of discontent and sources of resiliency to violent extremism in Bangladesh. The information contained therein gives nuanced insights useful to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to better understand the dynamics of conflict in Bangladesh and how otherwise disparate factors contribute to societal vulnerabilities to violent extremism.



# **Bangladesh On The Brink:** Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence

*Matthew J. Nelson and Seth Oldmixon*

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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is a product of the combined efforts of two leading researchers on Bangladesh—Matthew J. Nelson and Seth Oldmixon—and several members of the RESOLVE Secretariat, including Director Candace Rondeaux, Research Associate Kateira Aryaeinejad, and Associate Coordinators Bethany McGann and Megan Loney. Matthew Nelson is a Reader in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). His research focuses on the comparative and international politics of South Asia, with an emphasis on non-elite politics, comparative political thought, the politics of Islamic institutions, and democracy. Seth Oldmixon is a public affairs consultant who served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in Bangladesh. He is the founder of Liberty South Asia, an independent, privately funded campaign dedicated to supporting religious freedom and political pluralism in South Asia.

The result of desk research and findings from three expert workshops hosted by the RESOLVE Network in Bangladesh and Washington, DC, from November 2016 to April 2017, this report is part of a series of country studies that seeks to map emergent trends in political violence in Bangladesh. The report is intended to place violent extremism in a historical context, survey current challenges, and identify gaps in knowledge that will be the target of future research by those in the Network and others. The analysis conducted for this report surfaced insights regarding the sharp rise of violent extremism in the country. Discussions with stakeholders in Bangladesh and a desk review of the literature also revealed critical gaps in current research, particularly with respect to the link between domestic dynamics and the wider international trends that have catalyzed a surge in politically motivated violence targeting civilians around the world.

The analysis conducted for this report is part of a broader effort by the RESOLVE Network to address the gaps in locally informed, empirically driven research on the drivers of violent extremism in South Asia and other priority regions. The RESOLVE Network launched a pilot research network in Bangladesh in October 2016 to assess the risks and identify potential sources of community resilience within the country's increasingly volatile political climate. The RESOLVE Secretariat team worked closely with locally based researchers under the rubric of the Network's flagship Research Leadership Fellowship to explore different aspects of dynamics surrounding political violence in the country. Additional studies in this series will be published individually and as part of a compendium later in 2017.

For more information about RESOLVE and its network of experts in Bangladesh and elsewhere across parts of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, please visit our website at [www.resolvenet.org](http://www.resolvenet.org) and follow the discussion on Twitter via @resolvenet.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The July 2016 attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, changed the way the world thinks about political violence in Bangladesh. The attack killed 18 foreigners and produced a record number of casualties, exposing new dimensions in the rise of violent extremism in the country and in South Asia writ large. The young men who planned and conducted the assault in an upscale café in Dhaka's Gulshan neighborhood were mostly middle class. Several had studied abroad; others had earned degrees from some of Bangladesh's most prestigious universities. Some of the alleged perpetrators were also Bangladeshis with foreign nationalities. The attackers' privileged backgrounds struck a dissonant note with many of their compatriots, who had previously associated such brutal acts of violence with those who are poor and uneducated. It remains unclear whether the attackers were inspired by homegrown grievances, international influences and larger ideological movements, or a combination of both. What is clear is that the elite backgrounds of the attackers have led many to question the long-held belief that violence in Bangladesh is driven by poverty, poor education, and ignorance. Rather than view the attack as an aberration, however, the incident is better perceived as an expression of larger ongoing trends.

## History and Drivers of Violence

Bangladesh has a long history of political violence that predates its independence in 1971. Contrasting views of the nature of the state as secular and Bengali, or as Islamic and Bangladeshi, have fueled unrest ever since. This polarization continued to escalate in the past decade as the two major political parties—the Awami League and Bangladeshi Nationalist Party—competed for power.

Today, Bangladesh appears to be entering a perilous new phase of potential instability. The situation in Dhaka reflects a deep political polarization precipitated in part by sharp economic inequality and unresolved governance challenges. A recent escalation in political violence across the country could presage even greater instability as the nation nears its 2019 national elections. Moreover, safe spaces for public discourse and nonviolent political dissent seem to be shrinking rapidly. The historical background, as well as the political and economic contexts in which these dynamics are occurring, require careful consideration.

## Effects of Migration and Social Dislocation

In the past 20 years, the economy of Bangladesh has grown exponentially in tandem with the country's rapid integration into the globalized marketplace. Unprecedented growth in the garment trade, in particular, has fueled rapid urbanization, unexpected social change, and cultural dislocation. Women's roles in shaping the labor market and economy have expanded as their employment in the manufacturing sector has grown with the industry. This shift in gender dynamics could elicit a backlash among Bangladeshi extremist groups that advocate against women's empowerment.



Internationally, millions of itinerant Bangladeshi workers have migrated in search of employment in the global economy. The remittances from these migrant workers can help fuel growth; however, the ideas about political power, religion, and identity, as well as the networks to which these migrants are exposed while abroad, could influence trends in political violence once they return home. Rising Internet access and the falling cost of communications have expanded Bangladeshis' access to ideas and people globally, but these factors have also created new channels for those with violent intent, including the virulent ideologies of Da'esh<sup>1</sup> and al-Qaeda. These connections have already catalyzed an outcropping of domestic Bangladeshi affiliates of organizations including al-Qaeda and Da'esh and increased the threat of violence.

## Crafting a Response

The Bangladeshi state is struggling to keep up with these rapid and substantive changes and appears unsure how to appropriately use the tools of state authority, such as the security forces, in response to new dynamics. Excessive use of deadly force by police against alleged violent extremists risks undermining the legitimacy of the state. Moreover, Bangladesh's long tradition of constitutional secularism appears, to some, to be fraying. This process could invoke negative perceptions of the government and its ability to uphold equal and fair treatment for all of its citizens. A government response that is passive, that criticizes the victims of religiously motivated violence, that narrowly defines what constitutes a legitimate form of peaceful political activity, or that selectively defines what constitutes radical speech or extremist violence would risk fomenting further discontent and eroding democratic norms. The risk may be even higher if these polarizing trends continue in advance of the 2019 elections.

## Conclusions

In the wake of the July 2016 attack and a widespread escalation of political violence, it is increasingly imperative to better understand and address the challenges posed by the evolving social geography of political identity at home and violent social movements abroad.

Several key areas, in particular, warrant further study:

- The driving forces that have brought individuals together to foment violent attacks, such as the one on Holey Artisan Bakery, including the roles of education, employment, and narratives surrounding individual frustrations.
- The socioeconomic changes resulting from globalization and economic progress in the past two decades, particularly in terms of their contribution to violence.
- The political trends shaping government, governance, and who holds power in Bangladesh, to ensure that the importance of the country's evolving political context and its relationship to violence are acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> Da'esh is an Arabic translation of the acronym for the Islamic State in the Levant, also known as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). The RESOLVE Network refers to ISIS by this Arabic acronym.



# INTRODUCTION

The July 2016 terrorist attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, Bangladesh, called into question some popular assumptions underlying theories about the drivers of violent extremism in Bangladesh. Preliminary research conducted by the RESOLVE Network shows that violent extremism has been understudied in Bangladesh relative to other countries facing similar challenges.<sup>2</sup> Few major longitudinal studies have been conducted on the discourse of religious violence and the relationships among religious identity, citizenship, political legitimacy, governance, and social cohesion in Bangladesh. The little research that has been conducted by local and international researchers, experts, and area specialists on these themes has largely centered on perception polling data generated by Western survey teams with a limited sense of the granular trends and dynamic narratives that inform Bangladeshi conceptions of religious identity, citizenship, and governance. Publicly available data on the highly fluid local dynamics that have fueled the rise of violent extremist groups across all eight of the country's subnational political divisions is also lacking. This paucity has led to serious gaps in our understanding of how to respond effectively to the threats posed by extremism.

The analysis in this report is informed by three RESOLVE Network expert workshops conducted in Washington, DC and in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a review of the existing literature. It is intended to provide a broad overview of the historical context and current climate in Bangladesh while also locating gaps in the research on the drivers of violent extremism that merit further investigation. In discussions with more than 150 local Bangladeshi researchers, practitioners, and policymakers over the 10-month period leading up to the publication of this report, concerns were repeatedly raised about the intensifying polarization within the country and the lack of avenues for open public discussion about the politics of religion in the country. Protests at universities over the content of history and political science textbooks and aggressive demands from Islamist groups for the removal of symbolic vestiges of its colonialist and pluralist history are only the latest manifestations of the shrinking space for open debate. At one end of the spectrum, secularism is posited as extreme and antireligious, even overtly disrespectful of the traditions of the country's Muslim majority. Protections for the country's Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and Ahmadi minorities are seen, from this perspective, as a matter of lesser concern. At the other end of the spectrum, avowed atheists and others championing secularism and protection for minority rights aggressively reject what they view as a conservative Islamist push to seize control of the state. In this context, substantive coordination and communication between the government's administrative and security organs, as well as between the government and its citizens, grows increasingly important.

Findings from this report and the project overall show the importance of reconsidering conventional explanations for the rise of violent extremism in Bangladesh, specifically those based on education and poverty. The findings also highlight the importance of new factors related to rapid globalization, urbanization, socioeconomic change, and the ongoing relationship between internal and international political dynamics. High-quality research on the link between these factors and support for violent extremism in the country is needed to inform effective policy responses moving forward.

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2 RESOLVE Network Secretariat, "The Governance Nexus: Surveying the Research on Violent Extremism, Governance Failures, and the Quest for Political Legitimacy." RESOLVE Network Working Paper Series 1, no. 3, June, 2017.

# BACKGROUND

## The Politics of the Secular and the Sacred in Bangladesh (1971–90)

Conflicts over the relationship between the state and religion—specifically, Islam—during the founding and evolution of the Bangladeshi state are crucial in understanding the nature and drivers of violent extremism in the country. Roughly ninety percent of Bangladesh’s nearly 163 million people are Muslim, with an overwhelming Sunni majority.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that, in this context, postcolonial political discourse in Bangladesh has been framed as a struggle between the competing national identities of secular “Bengali” versus Islamist nationalism.

In the 1950s, Bengali intellectuals in what was then East Pakistan modified the principles of the “two-nation theory” to justify the creation of two separate homelands for South Asian Muslims. They argued that Bengalis were a separate “nation” from those in West Pakistan, defined by their unique language and culture.<sup>4</sup> West Pakistani elites attempted to crush this nationalist movement, eventually refusing to recognize the results of a national election in 1970 won by East Pakistan’s Bengali nationalist Awami League (AL), plunging the country into civil war.

Human rights abuses by the Pakistan Army and its Islamist proxies in East Pakistan, including a systematic program of rape ostensibly aimed at “purifying” the Bengali population, severely narrowed the scope for any future Bangladeshi attachment to a national identity based on religion. In fact student militias associated with an Islamist party known as the Jama’at-e-Islami (JI)—often described as a South Asian analogue of the Muslim Brotherhood—collaborated with the Pakistan Army in its effort to thwart the independence of Bangladesh, promoting a Pakistan-style Islamist nationalism as a counter to the AL’s ethno-linguistic Bengali nationalism. The JI party was banned shortly after Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971.

The ban on the JI, however, was lifted in 1975 by Major General Ziaur Rahman, who took power following the assassination of the country’s first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In a bid to gain legitimacy while acting as Chief Martial Law Administrator, General Zia, as he was known, amended the Constitution via Executive Order in 1977, replacing the commitment to the principle of secularism with “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah.”<sup>5</sup> He then founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which relied on religion to unite otherwise disparate groups against the AL. The BNP eventually emerged as the second largest political party and the main opponent of the AL.<sup>6</sup> The BNP’s ideology asserts Islamic

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3 Pew Research Center, “Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population,” (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Pew Research Center, 2009), 5.

4 Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 25-26).

5 Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History Since Independence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 71-72.

6 The AL grew out of a movement on university campuses during the 1950s to preserve Bengali as the lingua franca of East Pakistan; see Tariq Rahman, “The Urdu-English Controversy in Pakistan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (February 1997),

religious identity and “Bangladeshi,” as opposed to “Bengali” nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Unlike “Bengali” nationalism, based on Bengali language and culture, “Bangladeshi” nationalism envisions a state defined by religion—Islam—and territory.<sup>8</sup>

While a pro-Islamist strategy broadened the BNP’s political base, the party was unable to consolidate its hold on the state. General Zia was assassinated during a 1981 coup. Bangladesh’s next key leader, Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who took power in a 1982 coup, similarly employed Islamist rhetoric. For a brief moment, it seemed that General Ershad might enjoy more success in consolidating political power.<sup>9</sup>

## From Mainstream Politics to Militant Political Tactics (1990-2008)

As mainstream party politicians continued to leverage pro-Islamist political rhetoric to build their political base, an undercurrent of religious extremism began to take shape in Bangladesh. Some scholars trace this post-independence wave of right-wing religious militancy to the return of veterans from the Afghan jihad after 1992.<sup>10</sup> That year, a group of mujahideen returned from Afghanistan and announced the formation of a Bangladeshi wing of the Pakistani militant group Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, known as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh, or HuJI-B, led by Maulana Abdus Salam.<sup>11</sup> HuJI-B has been accused of perpetrating some of the terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, including a 1993 death threat against the secular author Taslima Nasreen; a 1999 assassination attempt targeting the poet Shamsur Rahman; and a 2000 assassination attempt targeting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of the AL since 1981.<sup>12</sup> HuJI-B was banned in October 2005, and one of its leaders, Mufti Abdul Hannan, was executed after being convicted for multiple attacks in April 2017.<sup>13</sup>

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177-207; *The Nation’s Voice, Vol. VII: Launching the State and the End of the Journey (August 1947-September 1948)*, ed. by Waheed Ahmad (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 2003), 243-58.

7 Tariq Rahman, “The Urdu-English Controversy in Pakistan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (February 1997), 177-207; *The Nation’s Voice, Vol. VII: Launching the State and the End of the Journey (August 1947-September 1948)*, ed. by Waheed Ahmad (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 2003), 243-58.

8 For more on this topic, see: Tanveer Fazal, “Religion and Language in the Formation of Nationhood in Pakistan and Bangladesh,” in *Nation and National Identity in South Asia*, ed. by S.L. Sharma and T. K. Oommen, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 175-200.

9 Sheila Tefft, “Bangladesh Leader’s Islamization Push Faces Hurdles: Political Suspicions and a ‘Laissez-Faire’ Culture Undermine Ershad’s Effort,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 13, 1988.

10 Ali Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web* (London: Routledge, 2008), 45.

11 Mohammad Jamil Khan, “Ferocious HujiB Now on the Wane,” *Dhaka Tribune*, August 21, 2016.

12 Bertil Lintner, “Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh,” in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, 421, ed. S. Limaye, R. Wirsing, and M. Malik (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004) ; C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller, “Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?,” 2016, 12.

13 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 1; Shariful Islam and Shakhawat Liton, “Huji Kingpin Muft Hannan Hanged,” *The Daily Star*, April 13, 2017.

In 2002 and 2004, respectively, two other militant Islamic organizations, the Jama'at-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and its affiliate, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), emerged on the political scene. Abdur Rahman formed JMB in 2004 with the goal of establishing Islamic rule in Bangladesh after meeting with members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood while studying at the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia. He then traveled to Pakistan, where he received training in weapons and strategy from Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).<sup>14</sup> JMB's strongest link to an international terrorist group has been to LeT,<sup>15</sup> although more recently, JMB has reportedly been recruiting for Da'esh.<sup>16</sup>

JMJB, in contrast, originally focused on eliminating left-wing militants—the Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP), in particular—that operated in the northwestern district of Rajshahi, the southeastern district of Satkhira, and the southwestern district of Chittagong, among others. Led by the mysterious commander Siddiqui Islam, commonly known as “Bangla Bhai,” JMJB's overarching goal was, like JMB's, to “establish a Taliban-like rule” via armed jihad.<sup>17</sup> Abdur Rahman of JMB and Siddiqui Islam of JMJB are believed to have planned joint attacks together.<sup>18</sup>

At an opposition rally in August 2004, JMJB carried out an attack on AL supporters, killing twenty people and narrowly missing the party's leader, Sheikh Hasina.<sup>19</sup> Another attack in January 2005 killed five more AL workers, including a former finance minister.<sup>20</sup> The incumbent government, led by the BNP and the JI within a so-called “Four-Party Alliance,” banned the JMB and the JMJB in February 2005. A few months later, in August 2005, JMB coordinated one of the largest terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, consisting of 459 explosions across sixty-three of the country's sixty-four districts in just forty minutes—killing around thirty people and wounding another 150.<sup>21</sup> The scale of this attack and the international attention it received rendered untenable denials that Islamist militancy posed a serious and immediate threat to the country's internal or national security.<sup>22</sup>

The JI party has repeatedly denied any association with JMB and JMJB, but a number of JMB and JMJB militants claim to have been inspired by the JI. Many of those militants, including the leaders of both groups, previously participated in JI's youth wing, Islami Chattra Shibir (ICS).<sup>23</sup> The BNP also denied any ties to violent religious extremism, although evidence indicates that the BNP has been willing to use

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14 Tipu Sultan, “Salafi Ideology behind JMB's Rise,” *Prothom Alo*, August 6, 2016.

15 International Crisis Group, “The Threat from Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh,” Asia Report No. 187, 2010, 3, 7-8; Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 118.

16 Lisa Curtis, “Why the Extremist Threat in Bangladesh Needs to Be Taken Seriously,” *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2015.

17 Julfikar Ali Manik, “Bangla Bhai Active for 6 Yrs,” *The Daily Star*, May 13, 2004.

18 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 120.

19 Eben Kaplan, “Bangladesh: Nationwide Attacks Raise Fears of Growing Islamist Presence,” Background, New Council on Foreign Relations, 2005.

20 Ibid.

21 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 45.

22 “Bombs Explode across Bangladesh,” *BBC News*, August 17, 2005.

23 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 45.

religious violence to serve its political goals. In 2001, BNP supporters carried out targeted acts of violence against minority Hindus and Ahmadis to suppress their participation in the general elections.<sup>24</sup>

Recent investigations and US State Department cables published by Wikileaks suggest that the BNP-JI alliance was not only complicit in the 2004 bombings that targeted AL members; it was also involved in protecting JMJB and JMB members after the 2005 attacks.<sup>25</sup> In 2003, the JI publicly condemned an umbrella organization known as Khatm-e-Nabuwat encompassing different groups bent on attacking the Ahmadi minority. Following a series of anti-Ahmadi attacks in 2003-04, the government did not prosecute those affiliated with Khatm-e-Nabuwat. Instead, it banned what it described as “provocative” Ahmadi publications.<sup>26</sup> Due to increased attacks on Ahmadis during this period, the US government made religious freedom a central point of discussion in its meetings with Bangladeshi officials.<sup>27</sup>

## Escalating Polarization (2009–17)

After two years under the administration of a military caretaker government, the AL returned to power following elections in 2008 and has remained in office since that time. It was elected on a platform that promised to establish a war crimes tribunal to prosecute those accused of abuses during Bangladesh’s war for independence, something that had been demanded by veterans of the 1971 war and considered “long overdue” by international human rights organizations.<sup>28</sup> The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), established in 2009, began arresting suspected war criminals, most of whom were high-ranking members of JI.<sup>29</sup> International human rights groups have expressed concern about the tribunal’s failure to meet international standards of justice since its establishment—standards relating to fair trials, fundamental rights, and judicial impartiality, in particular.<sup>30</sup> In February 2013, JI leader Abdul Qader Mollah was convicted of atrocities committed while collaborating with the Pakistan Army during the 1971 war and sentenced to life in prison. Hundreds of thousands of protesters demonstrated in Dhaka’s Shahbagh Square demanding that he be sentenced to death.<sup>31</sup>

A few months later, other mass demonstrations took place, this time organized by the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam, with the support of the BNP and JI. Gathered in Dhaka’s Shapla Square, they called for

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24 Amnesty International, “Bangladesh: Attacks on Members of the Hindu Minority,” December, 2001.

25 Julfikar A. Manik, “Three Terrorists Spilled the Beans,” *Dhaka Tribune*, August 21, 2014; “Bangla Bhai’s Deputy Khamaru Arrested Again,” *Dhaka Tribune*, September 26, 2016. US Embassy Dhaka, “JMB Terrorist Investigation Marches On—Up to a Point.” Wikileaks Cable: 06DHAKA2573\_a. Dated May 3, 2006.

26 Ibid., 34-36.

27 US Department of State, “International Freedom Report,” 2005.

28 Mark Dummat, “Calls for Bangladesh War Trials,” *BBC News*, March 21, 2008; Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Unique Opportunity for Justice for 1971 Atrocities,” 2011.

29 David Montero, “Bangladesh Arrests Are Opening Act of War Crimes Tribunal,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 14, 2010.

30 Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Guarantee Fair Trials for Independence-Era Crimes,” July 11, 2011a.

31 Tahmima Anam, “Shahbag Protesters versus the Butcher of Mirpur,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2013.



a 13-point platform to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic state.<sup>32</sup> During this period, clashes between Islamists and police resulted in more than 150 deaths and thousands of injuries.<sup>33</sup> Among Hefazat's demands was that "the 'atheist leaders' of the Shahbagh protests, bloggers, and other 'anti-Islamists' " be arrested and issued "stern" punishments. These demonstrations presented as a physical manifestation of the ideological clashes that had been growing for several years.

Violence targeting religious minorities returned in force during the 2014 elections, but it was the surge of attacks unrelated to elections that signaled a new era of violence for the country.<sup>34</sup> Between February 2013 and June 2016, thirty-nine victims described as "secularist" or "atheist" bloggers critical of Islamic fundamentalism were assassinated by means of guns, machetes, and small explosions.<sup>35</sup> These killings also targeted Hindus, Christians, Shi'a, and human rights activists. In one notable instance, extremists also targeted an English professor who was neither an "atheist" nor particularly "secular" in his personal habits or beliefs.<sup>36</sup> Many of these killings were variously claimed by JMB;<sup>37</sup> by another militant organization known as the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), a group that many see as a splinter or a more radical regrouping of JMB;<sup>38</sup> or by Al-Qaeda and Da'esh.

Up to this point, the targets were Bangladeshi nationals. Then, in September 2015, an Italian aid worker was killed in the Gulshan neighborhood of Dhaka, the same elite residential neighborhood where the Holey Artisan Bakery is based.<sup>39</sup> The attack on the bakery nine months later, with its high casualty rate and targeting of foreigners, made it impossible to see the attacks as merely cases of domestic political violence. In all, twenty-nine people were killed, including twenty hostages, two police officers, five gunmen, and two bakery staff. Eighteen of the twenty hostages killed were foreigners. Da'esh immediately claimed the credit for the attack.<sup>40</sup>

Bangladeshi society was shocked by the affluent and well-educated backgrounds of many of the young men involved, as it had previously been widely accepted that Islamist jihadis were economically disadvantaged

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32 Mohammad Al-Masum Molla, "BNP Tells Activists to Support Hefazat," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 6, 2013; Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, "Jamaat Extends Support to Hifazat-e-Islam's Long March Set for Saturday," April 5, 2013; Haroon Habib, "The 13-Point Demands," *The Hindu*, April 7, 2013.

33 Human Rights Watch, "Blood on the Streets: The Use of Excessive Force During Bangladesh Protests," August 1, 2013.

34 Victor Mallet, "Hindu Minority Become Target of Bangladesh Violence," *Financial Times*, January 13, 2014.

35 Geeta Anand and Julfikar A. Manik, "Bangladesh Says It Now Knows Who's Killing the Bloggers," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2016.

36 Atif J. Ahmad and Michael Kugelman, "How to Keep the Bangladesh Powder Keg from Exploding," *The National Interest*, July 4, 2016.

37 Shaikh A. Rahman, "Churches in Bangladesh Face New Islamist Threats," *Voice of America News*, December 2, 2015.

38 Ellen Barry, "Bangladeshi Suspected of Training Militants in Dhaka Bakery Attack Is Killed," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2017.

39 Julfikar Ali Manik and David Barstow, "ISIS Says It Killed Italian Aid Worker In Bangladesh," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2015.

40 "Bangladesh Siege: Twenty Killed at Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka," *BBC News*, July 2, 2016.

and poorly educated.<sup>41</sup> The alleged mastermind, Tamim Chowdhury, was a Canadian citizen who had studied at the University of Windsor.<sup>42</sup> Other attackers had attended the elite Monash University in Malaysia, including Nibras Islam (also known as Abu Muharib al-Bengal), whose father was a wealthy businessman and whose family had connections in the AL government. Andaleeb Ahmad and Rohan Imtiaz also had government ties. Nibras Islam, Rohan Imtiaz, and Meer Saameh Mubasheer had attended elite educational institutions in Dhaka, including the Scholastica school and North South University. Khairul Islam was the only attacker who did not attend a prestigious school or come from a wealthy family. The attack was also noted for its sophistication and clear intent to garner global attention.<sup>43</sup>

Despite claims of responsibility by Da'esh, Bangladesh's Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said that the attack was carried out by JMB.<sup>44</sup> While Da'esh later declared that Tamim Chowdhury had been leading their Bangladesh operations, authorities insisted that the group did not have a foothold in the country.<sup>45</sup> While some questioned those denials, others suggested that recent attacks merely pointed to a larger trend in which “entrepreneurial terrorists us[ed] the space provided by Da'esh [in Iraq and Syria] as a launching pad for their ... own [domestic] jihadist ambitions.”<sup>46</sup> There remains a lack of consensus regarding whether Da'esh has established a physical presence in the country, or whether domestic actors are merely inspired by the group. A lack of common understanding about who is planning and executing attacks, and why, poses a fundamental problem for those seeking to develop and implement policies to prevent violent extremism.

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41 “Bangladesh Attack: Shock over ‘Elite’ Holey Cafe Suspects,” *BBC News*, July 4, 2016.

42 Lizzie Dearden, “ISIS Bangladesh Attack ‘Mastermind’ Identified as Former Student from Canada Killed in Police Raid,” *The Independent*, August 27, 2016.

43 Amy Kazmin, “Dhaka Restaurant Attack Designed to Tevberate Globally,” *Financial Times*, July 3, 2016.

44 Aditya Kalra, Serajul Quadir, and Ruma Paul, “Bangladesh Gunmen Made No Demands, IS Not Involved—Minister,” *Reuters*, July 4, 2016.

45 Tamara Khandaker, “ISIS Just Identified a Dead Leader by Name and That’s Unusual,” *VICE News*, October 6, 2016.

46 Brian M. Jenkins, “Is the Surge in Terrorist Attacks Coincidence or Coordinated Campaign?,” *The Hill*, November 7, 2016.

# CHALLENGING THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

## Re-examining the Poverty Theory

Conventional wisdom long held that poverty is a key driver of extremism in Bangladesh.<sup>47</sup> This theory posits a causal link between poverty and terrorism that is not unique to Bangladesh. At a 2016 meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, some Member States maintained that terrorism could be effectively countered “by addressing the socioeconomic challenges” of vulnerable countries.<sup>48</sup> Recent research and evidence, however, upends long-held beliefs about the role of poverty and education as predictors of extremist violence.

There are few studies providing solid empirical data linking poverty to support for violent extremism and political violence. To the contrary, a 2002 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that “economic conditions and education are largely unrelated to participation in and support for terrorism.”<sup>49</sup> A 2016 analysis of support for suicide bombings based on Pew polling data similarly showed that Bangladeshi men and those who saw themselves as economically better off tended to be more supportive of such attacks than women and those who perceived themselves as economically disadvantaged.<sup>50</sup>

As extremist militancy has risen, Bangladesh has by many measures become more prosperous. Overall poverty declined from 44.2 percent in 1991 to 12.9 percent in 2016.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, income inequality has risen.<sup>52</sup> In at least one major multi-country statistical study, however, poverty and income inequality were found not to be significant predictors of involvement in terrorist violence.<sup>53</sup> When combined with a growing number of anecdotal accounts of police confrontations with well-educated militants in more well-off parts of the country, the data suggest that factors other than poverty and economic inequality may be more influential, and that the link between economic factors and violent extremism is less direct than many previously believed.

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47 Ravi Velloor, “Bangladesh: Poverty and Lack of Opportunities Make It Fertile for Extremist Ideology,” *The Straits Times*, January 20, 2016.

48 United Nations General Assembly, “Links between Extreme Poverty, Violent Extremism Can Be Broken by Creating Jobs, Reducing Inequalities, General Assembly Hears as Debate Concludes,” February 16, 2016.

49 Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova. “Education, Poverty And Terrorism: Is There A Causal Connection?,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): 119-44.

50 Fair, et al., “Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh,” 28.

51 World Bank, “Bangladesh Country Overview,” 2017b.

52 Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, “Human Development in South Asia 2015: The Economy and the People,” Report No. 18, Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, Lahore University of Management Sciences, 104.

53 Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); 47, 85-86.



Although poverty and violent extremism may not be definitively linked, there may be evidence that economic policy as a function of governance has an impact.<sup>54</sup> Extremist groups around the world often take advantage of poor governance by providing much-needed social services where the state is absent or ineffective. Doing so allows them to more easily propagate their ideology by ingratiating themselves with local communities.<sup>55</sup> Saudi charities have served as an important source of funds for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, enabling them to provide health and education initiatives for disadvantaged populations.<sup>56</sup> In Pakistan, the militant group LeT carries out charity and disaster relief work under the brands of Jama'at-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation (FIF).<sup>57</sup>

In Bangladesh, the government's provision of food security, healthcare, and other basic services, complemented by a number of large and influential nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), has seen steady improvements since independence. Data analyzed by the Pew Research Center showed no correlation between a desire for service provision, on the one hand, and "sharia-supporting groups and their support for violence," on the other.<sup>58</sup> Those observations notwithstanding, some NGOs have been suspected of propagating violent extremism in the country.<sup>59</sup> By providing humanitarian work and social services in underserved areas, some extremist groups have been able to penetrate deeper into society while making it more difficult for governments to step in and shut them down. As in other parts of the world where insurgencies and violent extremism have taken root, the link between the provision of public services and goods, on the one hand, and the legitimacy of armed actors, on the other hand, is important. More research is needed to accurately evaluate the extent to which extremist groups in Bangladesh are exploiting gaps in governance, particularly in social service provision.

## Understanding the Role of Education

Another well-worn theory links madrasa-based Qur'anic studies or religious education to the proliferation of violent extremist ideologies. However, many recent attacks, including the Holey Artisan Bakery, have not been organized by madrasa students. Instead they have been organized by students from some of the most prominent secular and elite private universities. Tamim Chowdhury, the mastermind of the Holy Artisan attack, was a chemist. Siful Haque Sujan, a Bangladeshi who became one of Da'esh's top cyber experts, was educated in systems engineering at the University of Glamorgan in Wales.<sup>60</sup> Touhidur Rahman, another computer engineer, funded and directed ABT militants in Bangladesh from his home in London.<sup>61</sup>

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54 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," 19-20.

55 Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011), 186.

56 Corinne Graff, "Poverty, Development, and Violent Extremism in Weak States," in *Confronting Poverty: Weak States and U.S. National Security*, ed. Susan E. Rice, Corinne Graff, and Carlos Pascual (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 67.

57 Omar Waraich, "Terrorism-Linked Charity Finds New Life Amid Pakistan Refugee Crisis," *Time*, May 13, 2009.

58 Ibid.

59 Paul Cochrane, "The Funding Methods of Bangladesh Terrorist Groups," *CTC Sentinel*, May 15, 2009.

60 Ben Farmer, Nicola Harley, Richard Spencer, and Tom Whitehead, "Cardiff Businessman Turned ISIL Cyber Expert Killed in Air Strike," *The Telegraph*, December 30, 2015.

61 Fariha Karim, "British IT Expert 'Ran Bangladeshi Terrorist Group from London'," *The Times*, August 22, 2015.

Bangladesh's universities have been heavily politicized since the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1960s. Over subsequent decades, student activism evolved into "armed fronts of [mainstream] political parties vying for dominance on campus."<sup>62</sup> Public universities emerged as hotbeds for political violence, with "student leaders at public universities ... regularly in the news for ... murder, killing, extortion, arson, assaults on teachers, destruction of private property, and sexual offences."<sup>63</sup> Violence has spread to private universities as well.<sup>64</sup>

Universities may play a more significant role in violent extremism dynamics than has been considered to date. They remain a place where Islamist and secular ideas clash. The introduction of controversial changes to textbooks, in accordance with the demands of Islamist extremists in early 2017, ignited major unrest on campuses across the country. This is only one of many signs of deeper rifts within one of the few remaining spaces for open public discourse in the country.<sup>65</sup> Frictions between secular and pro-Islamist student wings of national political parties, such as ICS, as well as quietist Salafi supporters of Hizb-ut Tahrir, over faculty appointments, student housing, and curricula reflect longstanding historical divisions that have become more complex and entrenched.<sup>66</sup>

Anecdotal evidence suggests that well-educated individuals can be drawn to extremist movements out of a sense of frustrated economic and professional expectations. Much has been made of the fact that some of the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers had backgrounds in engineering and the role this profession has played in violent extremism.<sup>67</sup> It is not known if unmet career aspirations drove the frustration, disillusionment, and ultimately the radicalization of these attackers. A 2014 report found that, across South Asia, the youth bulge that resulted from rapid population growth has led to high rates of unemployment or underemployment among those with tertiary education, including almost half of Bangladeshi graduates.<sup>68</sup> Analyzing the career trajectory of individuals, however, reveals little about the social networks that inform their responses to the political or religiously-based rhetoric to which they are exposed. It is also unclear to what extent the social bonds within groups of students are formed by the faculties with whom they study or the subject matter that they study.

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62 Dina Mahnaz Siddiqui, "Contemporary Political Culture," in *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*, ed. by Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 14.

63 M. Niaz Asadullah, "Dhaka Café Attack: Don't Blame Private Education for Radicalisation in Bangladesh," *The Conversation*, August 2, 2016.

64 Matthew J. Nelson, "Religion, Politics, and the Modern University in Pakistan and Bangladesh," in *Islamic Education in Bangladesh and Pakistan: Trends in Tertiary Education*, ed. by Mumtaz Ahmad and Matthew J. Nelson (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2009).

65 Ellen Barry and Julfikar Ali Manik, "To Secular Bangladeshis, Textbook Changes Are a Harbinger," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017.

66 Nelson, "Religion, Politics, and the Modern University in Pakistan and Bangladesh," 61-65.

67 Gambetta and Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: Violent Extremism and Education*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 159.

68 Economic Intelligence Unit, "High University Enrolment, Low Graduate Employment: Analyzing the Paradox in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka," January 2014.

Moreover, it is uncertain what role the barriers to social mobility that are embedded within many post-colonial educational systems might play. Obstacles to obtaining certain types of educational specialization and certain types of jobs might shape ties between individuals in university settings. A more granular analysis of the labor market and exclusionary practices within the country's educational system, or professions, deserves greater inquiry as part of a broader effort to understand violent extremist demographics, networks, and recruitment.

# EMERGING TRENDS: THE NEW SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

## Globalization

The new social geography of political violence in Bangladesh needs to be better understood. Challenging previous notions about what drives violent extremism, this new social geography provides a potentially data-rich set of case studies illuminating the impact of emerging global trends on extremism and violence. Bangladesh's rapid economic growth, driven by increased integration with the global economy, has fueled extensive urbanization and improved most socioeconomic indicators for its people.<sup>69</sup> These dynamics, however, also raise important questions about the impact, if any, of such changes on the spread of violent extremism.

The expansion of the manufacturing industry, led in part by Bangladesh's still-growing readymade garment industry, has facilitated increased trade with regional and global partners. The country's low-cost labor market has contributed to rising international demand for Bangladeshi garments and other manufactured goods, and furthered Bangladesh's integration into the global economy. In 2016, readymade garments exported to wealthy Western countries accounted for approximately eighty-two percent of all Bangladeshi exports.<sup>70</sup> Although the revenue from textile and manufacturing exports has spiraled upward in recent decades, wages have stagnated; unemployment, although diminished slightly from 2009 levels, has fluctuated.<sup>71</sup> How do these patterns feed the narratives of violent extremism in Bangladesh, particularly with respect to foreigners and the violence directed at them or at those associated with them? This is an important question that merits further research.

## Urbanization

Increases in trade and production spur the growing demand for labor in the manufacturing sector, which, in turn spurs urbanization. Between 1974 and 2011, the proportion of Bangladesh's population living in urban areas increased from nine to twenty-eight percent.<sup>72</sup> One recent estimate reports that nearly 40 million people—one-third of the country's population—reside in urban centers. More than seventy

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69 For the numbers from 1990 to 2016, see the World Bank Country Profile, accessed June 2017, at: [data.worldbank.org/country/Bangladesh](http://data.worldbank.org/country/Bangladesh).

70 Kiran Stacey, "Bangladesh Garment-Making Success Prompts Fears for the Wider Economy," *The Financial Times*, January 6, 2017.

71 Unemployment in Bangladesh has fallen by just under 1 percent since its peak at 5 percent in 2009. In 2016, unemployment levels in Bangladesh were 4.066 percent. For the numbers, see World Bank data, accessed June 2017, at: [data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=BD](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=BD).

72 Gavin Jones, AQM Mahbub, and Md. Izazul Haq, "Urbanization and Migration in Bangladesh," United Nations Population Fund, 2016.

percent of Bangladesh's projected 230 million people are expected to be urban dwellers by 2060.<sup>73</sup> Urban residents are generally young. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimates that forty-two percent of the population is younger than nineteen years of age.<sup>74</sup>

In Bangladesh, the link has already been made between highly urbanized areas and anti-militancy operations by security forces against violent extremists. Gazipur, located at the heart of Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, has been one such rapidly growing and urbanizing district. In October 2016, seven militants were killed during a joint police and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) raid. A recent report by the Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS) at the University of Dhaka studying community experiences in Gazipur suggests that extremists are attracted to Gazipur because its dense and diverse population of internal migrants makes outsiders less visible. Regarded as a "planning zone for criminals," the district is a place where drugs and weapons are also available.<sup>75</sup> The report also raises several interesting questions about the proliferation of unresolved grievances in impoverished urban areas stemming from a lack of sanitation, high crime, and underemployment, and whether these factors lead to greater affinity for extremist views. It also asks how migrant demographics and experiences might shape attitudes toward the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution. Again, further study of these narratives needs to be encouraged.

## Online Communication

As wealth and urbanization have increased, innovation has led to falling costs and rapidly increasing access to the Internet, particularly among wealthier and better-educated Bangladeshis. Bangladesh was a relative latecomer to the Internet, with limited access becoming first available in 1996; however, the country is rapidly catching up. In February 2017, improvements in technology infrastructure increased available bandwidth six-fold.<sup>76</sup> The number of Bangladeshis with Internet access has risen from 93,261 in 2000 to 21,439,070 in less than two decades.<sup>77</sup> Broadband and mobile phone subscriptions have also increased.<sup>78</sup> Some analysts attribute the rise of militancy in Bangladesh to this combination of rapid urbanization and technological growth.<sup>79</sup> The intersection of these trends deserves closer study to determine if, and how, they might interact with religious and political extremist violence.

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73 CARE Bangladesh, "Urban Socio-Economic Study of Gazipur City Corporation (GCC)," July 31, 2014.

74 Ibid.

75 CGS, "CGS Peace Report," The University of Dhaka, May-June 2017.

76 "Bangladesh Connects Second Submarine Cable on Feb. 21," *Dhaka Tribune*, February 8, 2017.

77 World Bank, "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)." [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017a; "Bangladesh Internet Users," Internet Live Stats, accessed June 2017, [www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/bangladesh/](http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/bangladesh/)

78 World Bank, "Fixed Broadband Subscriptions." [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017c. Retrieved from data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.BBND; World Bank, "Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (per 100 people)." [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017d. Retrieved from data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2.

79 Mubashar Hasan, "Threats of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh Are a Symptom of Deeper Social and Political Problems," *The Conversation*, January 11, 2017.

## Social Change, Dislocation, and Displacement

In addition to globalization, urbanization, and online communication, Bangladesh is also experiencing a period of rapid social change driven by economic growth that is challenging longstanding cultural and social mores. Some argue that local militancy may, at least in part, be a reflection of a much broader crisis of masculinity. Men who might already be inclined to see themselves occupying less privileged positions in the global social order find that, increasingly, they must share the space to allow for inclusion of women. In South Asia, some religious groups frame the redistribution of “gendered” power as the result of Western influence designed to isolate or weaken Muslim men. This dynamic was demonstrated in the thirteen demands framed by the religiously conservative group Hefazat-e-Islam in 2013, which included putting an end to “free-mixing of men and women” as well as what they saw as the “anti-Islam women policy” of the government. One of the factors that triggered the formation of Hefazat-e-Islam was the introduction of new women’s rights legislation in 2009.<sup>80</sup>

Women’s role in Bangladeshi society appears to be changing amid an influx of jobs created by globalization in manufacturing and amid associated trends in urbanization. The 2011 census found that young women aged 15-29 accounted for a dominant portion of the country’s rural-urban migration flow.<sup>81</sup> What these young women are doing when they reach urban areas is not entirely clear. There are, however, indications that some of them may be entering the labor force. According to World Bank predictions, Bangladesh’s female workforce will grow from 34 to 82 percent over the next decade.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) reported that, from 2010-13, the share of women in manufacturing doubled and became much higher than that of men.<sup>83</sup> Could extremists be exploiting social tensions resulting from a rapid influx of young women into the urban workforce? These dynamics, as they apply to Bangladesh, merit greater scrutiny.

Analysts looking for links among social change, women’s workforce participation, and extremism will be frustrated until basic workforce data collection is improved in Bangladesh. In a 2013 examination of female labor participation in the country, International Labour Organization (ILO) analysts noted that data on female labor force participation is irregular and insufficient to conduct accurate statistical examinations of certain relationships.<sup>84</sup> Reliable long-term statistics about Bangladesh’s labor force are simply not available. In a positive development in March 2017, however, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, with technical assistance from the World Bank, published the first “Quarterly Labour Force Survey” (QLFS) covering July 2015 to June 2016.<sup>85</sup> This 2015-16 QLFS will provide a critical resource for researchers

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80 Toufique Imrose Khalidi, “Behind the Rise of Bangladesh’s Hifazat,” *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2013.

81 Gavin Jones, et al., *Urbanization and Migration in Bangladesh*, 2016.

82 Rejaul Karim Byron and Md Fazlur Rahman, “Women Workforce Growing Fast,” *The Daily Star*, October 11, 2015.

83 ADB, “Employment and the Labor Market in Bangladesh: Overview of Trends and Challenges,” ADB Briefs, No. 62, August 2016.

84 Rushidan I. Rahman and Rizwanul Islam, “Female Labour Force Participation in Bangladesh: Trends, Drivers and Barriers,” ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series, International Labour Organization, October 2013, 9.

85 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, “Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2015-2016,” (Accessed June 16, 2017).



and policymakers. However, unless the government continues to regularly collect and publish these vital data, this survey will offer little more than a noncontiguous snapshot of once-current trends. Furthermore, while quantitative information is valuable, qualitative studies in this area may produce even more fruitful insights into these dynamics.

How extremist groups respond to changes in women's roles in Bangladesh is relevant to ongoing debate around assumptions about the impact of female empowerment on efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE). Some have argued that female empowerment has the potential to influence the success of CVE programming and strategies in Bangladesh.<sup>86</sup> Others suggest that cultural notions of masculinity can be a driver of religiously motivated violence. In Pakistan, for example, observers have noticed that much of the discourse around “blasphemy” involves “appeals to...manhood.”<sup>87</sup>

Debates regarding gender and extremism are further complicated by reports indicating that a growing number of Bangladeshi women are becoming involved in extremist violence.<sup>88</sup> The participation of females as combatants is not new in South Asia.<sup>89</sup> Even so, the path to radicalization for women is no clearer than it is for men. As with their male counterparts, there is diversity in the profiles of women who become radicalized.<sup>90</sup> This diversity notwithstanding, further study of the specific experiences of women may yield important insights for effective counter-extremism programming.<sup>91</sup>

## Migration and Displacement

International migration is a prominent feature of the social landscape of Bangladesh. An estimated 10.4 million Bangladeshi nationals are employed overseas; twelve percent of the workforce leaves the country annually.<sup>92</sup> Bangladeshis abroad infuse billions of dollars in remittances into the country's economy.<sup>93</sup> The advance of climate-related sea level changes has the potential to significantly reshape Bangladesh's deltaic

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86 Krista London Couture, “A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Women in Peace-building and Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully in Bangladesh and Morocco.” Policy Paper, The Brookings Institution, July 2014.

87 Ayehsa Iftikhar, “Blasphemy and Extremism,” Keynote conversation at the Blasphemy Laws as a Challenge to Religious Freedom conference at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, April 20, 2016.

88 Kamrul Hasan and Arifur Rahman Rabbi, “Bangladesh's Female Jihadists,” *The Dhaka Tribune*, December 25, 2016.

89 Nazneen Mohsina, “Growing Trends of Female Jihadism in Bangladesh,” *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2017.

90 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.

91 Ibid.

92 International Organization for Migration, “Bangladesh Country Strategy Plan (2017-2020), 2017.

93 Bangladesh received over \$13 billion (in current USD) in remittances in 2016, or approximately 6.2% of its GDP. For more, see: World Bank, “Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP).” [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017e. Retrieved from [data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS); World Bank, “Personal Remittances, Received (current US\$).” [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017f. Retrieved from [data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT)

terrain, which could result in unprecedented levels of internal displacement and external outmigration.<sup>94</sup> Amid these trends, concern is growing that radicalization is being imported by members of the Bangladeshi diaspora.

Concern regarding radicalization trends flowing in from the Bangladeshi diaspora long predates the active involvement of foreign citizens of Bangladeshi descent in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack.<sup>95</sup> For example, militants like JMB founder Abdur Rahman brought home violent extremist ideas and tactics after returning from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bangladeshi security analysts have also expressed concern about extremism in the expatriate community living in the UK.<sup>96</sup> In 2015, a British man of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in connection with the murders of prominent secular bloggers. The preceding year, another British citizen of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in Dhaka on charges of recruiting fighters for Da'esh operations in Syria.<sup>97</sup> More recently, concerns have been raised regarding Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia and Singapore, many of whom support ABT, and their efforts to recruit fellow workers for engagement in violence at home.<sup>98</sup>

There is also concern that radicalism is arriving with migrants flowing into Bangladesh from neighboring areas. An estimated 400,000 undocumented Myanmar nationals live in the southern areas of Bangladesh,<sup>99</sup> and there are legitimate concerns that the mishandling of the growing insurgency in Myanmar could increase those numbers.<sup>100</sup> Rohingya militants in Myanmar and in sprawling refugee camps near the Bangladeshi town of Cox's Bazaar, may fuel further militancy. The Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), established during the early 1980s, is thought to have trained and collaborated with HuJI-B and JMB<sup>101</sup> in the hills of southeastern Bangladesh.<sup>102</sup> The government of Bangladesh clamped down on the RSO in 2001.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, however, the ruling BNP-JI alliance was accused of having tacitly encouraged RSO activities.<sup>104</sup>

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94 Robert Glennon, "The Unfolding Tragedy of Climate Change in Bangladesh," *Scientific American*, April 21, 2017.

95 International Crisis Group, "The Threat from Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh," Asia Report No. 187, March 1, 2010.

96 Simon Tisdall and Anna Ridout, "British Jihadis in Bangladesh Fanning Flames of Extremism, Says Dhaka," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2015.

97 "Bangladesh Arrests Three Men Including Briton over Murders of Secular Bloggers," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2015; Serajul Quadir, "Bangladesh Arrests Briton for Suspected Islamic State Recruitment," *Reuters*, September 29, 2014.

98 IPAC, "How Southeast Asian and Bangladeshi Extremism Intersect," Report No. 37, Institute for Policy Analysis on Conflict, (May 8, 2017): 1.

99 International Organization for Migration, "Bangladesh Country Strategy Plan (2017-2020)," (2017).

100 International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State," Asia Report No. 283, (December 15, 2016a): 21.

101 Bertill Lintner, "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh," in *Religious Radicalism in and Security in South Asia*, ed. by Satu P. Limaye, Mohan Malik, and Robert Wirsing, (Honolulu, HI: APCSS, 2004), 413–436.

102 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?", 12.

103 Lintner, "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh," 2002.

104 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?", 2016.



At one point, HuJI-B declared a desire to expand its activities into non-Muslim majority countries, such as Myanmar and the Philippines, seeking a closer relationship with the RSO to achieve this.<sup>105</sup> In early 2017, Malaysian counter-terrorism officials warned that Da'esh had been using the Rohingya issue to recruit new militants.<sup>106</sup> This is not simply a problem for Rohingya. Other analysts have noted that Bangladeshi students enrolled in Malaysian universities have developed pro-Da'esh sympathies, either at home or while studying in Malaysia. Some have used Kuala Lumpur as their point of departure for travel to fight in Syria, where they network with other Southeast Asian militants.<sup>107</sup>

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105 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 117.

106 Rozanna Latiff, "Myanmar Faces Danger from Islamic State Militants, Malaysian Police Say," *Reuters*, January 4, 2017.

107 IPAC, "How Southeast Asian and Bangladeshi Extremism Intersect," 2017.

# POLITICAL TRENDS

## The Rise of Da'esh and Al-Qaeda Affiliates

Before the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, it was thought that Da'esh had not infiltrated South Asia to the same extent as its rival, al-Qaeda.<sup>108</sup> The extent to which Holey Artisan and other recent attacks might be connected to Da'esh, or simply inspired by their credo, remains uncertain. Groups such as ABT, however, have reported ties to both Da'esh and Al-Qaeda.<sup>109</sup> In 2015, Da'esh's propaganda magazine *Dabiq* also featured an article entitled "The Revival of Jihad in Bengal," claiming responsibility for specific attacks in Bangladesh and promising more.<sup>110</sup> In early 2016, *Dabiq* published an article reiterating that Da'esh was present in Bangladesh and suggesting that the group's operations in the country were extensive. The edition also included profiles of individual Bangladeshi fighters and spoke of Muslims living under the oppression of Buddhists and Hindus, particularly in Myanmar, and advocating for killing Hindus across the border in India.<sup>111</sup>

Besides Al-Qaeda and Da'esh, other regional militants have created networks with suspected ties to Bangladesh. Pakistan-based LeT, for example, is thought to operate through a number of front organizations, including Jama'at-ud-Dawa and Falah-e-Insaniat.<sup>112</sup> Shahadat-e Al-Hiqma, which held a press conference in 2003 to say it was planning violence in Bangladesh before being banned in 2005, is also suspected of ties to LeT, receiving funds from a mosque in Karachi and from (or via) JMB.<sup>113</sup> Apart from this support from LeT, JMB might also be supported by Gulf-based charities like the Kuwaiti Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage that was designated by the US as a funder for Al-Qaeda in 2008.<sup>114</sup> Greater understanding of the nature and extent of the influence of transnational violent extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Da'esh is needed.

## State Priorities, Political Dissent, and the Security Sector

With their attacks on bloggers and intellectuals, militants have been accused of seeking to use violence to curb freedom of expression and impose limits on acceptable public discourse. The government of Bangladesh has also been accused of new forms of censorship since the Shahbagh protests in 2013. In its *World*

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108 Atif J. Ahmad and Michael Kugelman, "Will ISIS Infect Bangladesh?", *The National Interest*, December 8, 2015.

109 Bangladesh Police Arrest Suspect in Killing of Gay Activist," *Associated Press News*, May 15, 2016.

110 "Islamic State threatens More Attacks in 'Bengal', Meaning Bangladesh," *bdnews24.com*, November 21, 2015.

111 Anup Kaphle, "ISIS Really Wants You to Know It's Operating in Bangladesh," *BuzzFeed News*, April 13, 2016.

112 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," 13; see also, Christine Fair and Seth Oldmixon, "Think Again: Islamism and Militancy in Bangladesh," *The National Interest*, August 13, 2015.

113 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 122-23; Ahmad and Kugelman, "Will ISIS Infect Bangladesh?", December 8, 2015.

114 U.S. Department of Treasury, "Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling Al Qaida Network," press release, July 13, 2008.

*Report 2017*, Human Rights Watch reported that the government had “clamped down on media and civil society,” adding that “state authorities detained, maimed, killed, and disappeared members of the political opposition.” The government’s initial reaction to the first round of blogger killings was to suggest that the bloggers themselves should “refrain from ‘hurting religious sentiments.’”<sup>115</sup> Human rights organizations warned that such statements sent “mixed messages” about violent extremism. They urged authorities to prosecute attackers rather than individuals expressing opinions about religion.<sup>116</sup>

Ultimately, Bangladeshi authorities pursued both alleged “provocateurs” and militants.<sup>117</sup> The number of suspected militants killed during efforts to capture them, without any prosecution or legal due process, is substantial. A former member of HuJI-B now associated with ABT, Shariful Islam Shihab, was among those arrested for killing a gay rights activist.<sup>118</sup> A month later, he was shot in a gunfight with police.<sup>119</sup> The police also killed nine militants suspected of plotting an attack similar to that on the Holey Artisan Bakery.<sup>120</sup> In August 2016, the police shot and killed the suspected mastermind of the Holey Artisan attack and two other suspects.<sup>121</sup> The previous BNP-JI government similarly used the armed forces, the police, and an elite joint force known as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). It commenced operations in April 2004; by July of that year, the national media were openly expressing concern about its activities.<sup>122</sup> A 2006 Human Rights Watch report wrote that the RAB had been “implicated in the unlawful killings of at least 350 people in custody, and the alleged torture of hundreds more.”<sup>123</sup>

There are several reasons to fear the situation is getting worse. When the AL returned to power in 2009, it empowered the police and the RAB to apprehend “extremists,” dismantle militant cells, and counter their ability to radicalize and recruit. By 2011, the number of unlawful killings by RAB had more than doubled.<sup>124</sup> Accurate statistics are hard to obtain, but home ministry officials told one research organization that more than 2,400 militants were arrested between 2005 and 2013.<sup>125</sup> As of April 2016, at least 154 Islamist extremists were on death row.<sup>126</sup> Suspected militants are not alone in having been targeted by the paramilitary force. In a rare example of accountability, sixteen members of RAB were sentenced to death

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115 Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Disappearances, Clampdown on Critics,” January 12, 2017.

116 Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Stop Promoting Self Censorship,” August 11, 2015.

117 “Bloggers in Bangladesh Protest over Arrest of Writers,” BBC News, April 4, 2013.

118 “Bangladesh Police Arrest Suspect in Killing of Gay Activist,” *Associated Press News*, May 15, 2016.

119 Farid Ahmed, “Bangladesh: Key Suspect in Blogger Avijit Roy’s Murder ‘Killed in Gunfight,’” *CNN*, June 20, 2016.

120 Ruma Paul, “Bangladesh: Nine Militants Killed in Police Raid,” *The Wire*, July 26, 2016.

121 Roland Oliphant, “Bangladesh Police Kill ‘Mastermind’ of Dhaka Cafe Massacre,” *The Telegraph*, August 27, 2016.

122 “RAB Operations: Reign It In Before It Turns into a Monster,” *The Daily Star*, July 23, 2004.

123 Human Rights Watch, “Judge, Jury, and Executioner: Torture and Extrajudicial Killings by Bangladesh’s Elite Security Force,” December 13, 2006.

124 Human Rights Watch, “Crossfire: Continued Human Rights Abuses by Bangladesh’s Rapid Action Battalion,” May 10, 2011b.

125 International Crisis Group, “Political Conflict, Extremism, and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh,” Asia Report No. 277, (2016): 6.

126 Ibid.

in January 2017 for their role in politically motivated killings.<sup>127</sup> In May 2017, RAB detained twenty-nine young men “on suspicion of homosexuality.”<sup>128</sup> On May 20, 2017, police raided the Dhaka office of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia; they were reportedly searching for “anti-state materials,” but nothing was found.<sup>129</sup> Mrs. Zia also faces a number of legal cases, including one for sedition after an AL lawyer accused her of questioning the number of people killed in the 1971 war of independence.<sup>130</sup>

This situation is problematic, not only because of human rights concerns, but also because extra-judicial killings and politically motivated raids can damage the credibility of the state and fuel extremist propaganda. Killing suspects and dampening due process deprives researchers and officials of critical open source information that could elucidate the drivers and networks of violent extremists.

## The Evolution and Decline of Secularism

There is growing concern about whether Bangladesh’s secular “center” can hold in the face of increased pressure from Islamist groups. The AL has long been held up as the standard bearer of secular politics in Bangladesh. The party’s return to power in 2009 was heralded by many as a reaffirmation of the country’s commitment to secularism.<sup>131</sup> During the AL’s tenure, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has offered repeated reassurances to Bangladesh’s religious minorities, particularly Hindus.<sup>132</sup> Following a series of attacks against Hindus last November, the AL government vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice, pledging that “communal harmony will be maintained at all costs.”<sup>133</sup>

Concern is growing, however, about Bangladesh’s commitment to secularism in the face of intense pressure from Islamist groups. In January 2017, changes were made to textbooks in accordance with the demands of groups like Hefazat-e-Islam.<sup>134</sup> Soon after, the government weakened prohibitions against child marriage.<sup>135</sup> In April 2017, the AL boycotted traditional processions celebrating the *Bengali New Year*, also called Pohela Boishakh, after criticism by Islamists.<sup>136</sup> In May 2017, in the dead of night,

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127 “A Lesson in Law,” *The Daily Star*, January 19, 2017.

128 “RAB Detains 29 ‘Homosexuals,’” *Prothom Alo*, May 19, 2017.

129 Arifur Rahman Rabbi and Manik Miazee, “Police Raid Khaleda’s Gulshan Office,” *Dhaka Tribune*, May 20, 2017.

130 “SC Order on Khaleda’s Barapukuria Graft Case May 28,” *Dhaka Tribune*, May 22, 2017; “Sedition Trial against Khaleda Stayed for 6 Months,” *The Daily Star*, March 29, 2017.

131 Jyoti Thottam, “A Secular Victory in Bangladesh Election,” *Time*, December 30, 2008.

132 “PM Stresses Full Rights for Hindus,” *The Daily Star*, October 14, 2013.

133 “None to Be Spared over Attack on Hindus: AL,” *The Daily Star*, November 1, 2016.

134 Ellen Barry and Julfikar Ali Manik, “To Secular Bangladeshis, Textbook Changes Are a Harbinger,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017.

135 Maher Sattar and Ellen Barry, “Bangladesh Weakens Longstanding Law Against Underage Marriage,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2017.

136 Ikhtisad Ahmed, “Three More Signs that Bangladesh’s Ruling Awami League Has Tightened Its Embrace of Islamism,” *Scroll.in*, April 28, 2017.

the government removed a Greek-style statue of Lady Justice from the grounds of the Supreme Court, acquiescing to the demands of Islamist groups.<sup>137</sup>

Some analysts have expressed concerns that “a dark political calculation” might lie behind these changes.<sup>138</sup> AL officials have told reporters that the party is looking to a strategic partnership with Hefazat-e-Islam in the lead-up to the 2019 general elections.<sup>139</sup> These reports were swiftly denied by party leaders, who characterized the members of Hefazat as “religion-based political opportunists” and extremists. Still, repeated concessions have left many worried that secularism in Bangladesh is in retreat.<sup>140</sup> Whatever the reasoning behind these moves, even the appearance of collaboration and concessions to extremist groups is likely to result in the normalization and proliferation of extremist ideology in Bangladesh, just as it did in other nations that employed such strategies.<sup>141</sup>

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137 Julfikar Ali Manik and Ellen Barry, “Statue of Woman Removed from Bangladesh’s Supreme Court,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2017.

138 K. Anis Ahmed, “Bangladesh’s Creeping Islamism,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 2017.

139 Anwar Hossain, “AL’s Hefazat Tie Strategic, Temporary!,” *Prothom Alo*, April 14, 2017.

140 Kudrote Khoda Sobuj Kushtia, “Inu: Hefazat Has Nothing to Do with AL-Led Alliance,” *Dhaka Tribune*, April 18, 2017.

141 Husain Haqqani, “Islamists and the ‘Arab Spring’,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, 2013, 5-14.

# CONCLUSION

## What's Missing from the Map?

Reviewing the past and present of violent extremism in Bangladesh reveals a deep history of political violence stretching back to the country's struggle for independence—a history that has now merged with the ideologies and deadly tactics of global extremist movements. The challenge for those seeking to understand and counter this violence lies in accumulating the knowledge required to parse the domestic factors supporting it from the broad international factors that intensify and reshape it. While by no means comprehensive, this report does identify certain gaps in our understanding regarding the impact of specific social, economic, and political dynamics. Addressing these gaps is an essential first step for those seeking to develop new strategies and programs to counter violent extremism.

## Motivations

Bangladesh's violent political history and its struggles to define a national identity, fought between secular and religious parties, are well known. Recently, however, the country's leap into the realm of international terrorism, as witnessed in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack and its alleged ties to Da'esh, has called into question previously held assumptions about extremist violence in Bangladesh. Given the privileged backgrounds of the attackers, for instance, assumptions about poverty and traditional forms of education driving such violence may have lost their validity. A commitment to better understanding the motivations, frustrations, and aspirations of Bangladesh's new class of violent extremists is needed.

## Social Geography

In the past two decades, Bangladesh has experienced profound changes. Rapid economic growth has been accompanied by dramatic social change in the form of greater global integration, urbanization, and expanding opportunities for women. Layered over this dynamic have been advances in communication technologies, including expanding Internet access and increasing mobile phone usage. The new urban economy and the jobs it brings as a dividend of globalization may disproportionately benefit women, with the potential to challenge traditional notions of masculinity and, in doing so, foment a violent response. Large-scale international migration adds another layer of complexity, exposing Bangladeshis who travel abroad to radical new ideas and networks. Further research is necessary to explore how recent changes in Bangladesh's political economy and social fabric interact with extremist violence.

## Political Trends

Finally, political dynamics in the country merit further research and ongoing attention. The ideas of al-Qaeda and the rise of Da'esh are ever-present and available to the small cadre of people in the country that is able and willing to receive them. The state's response to radicalism and its use of security forces

to deal with threats, if perceived as heavy-handed, however, could risk furthering violent extremism. A reluctance to uphold secular and democratic principles and defend minorities in the face of attacks may also encourage additional radicalism in the country. In an increasingly polarized environment, political dynamics and state responses to extremism need to be constantly monitored for their impact on militant trends. Closely tracking these political dynamics will remain an integral part of any effort to develop effective responses to the rise of violent extremism in Bangladesh.



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# **The Language of Youth Politics in Bangladesh:** Beyond the Secular- Religious Binary

*Mubashar Hasan, PhD*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# KEY FINDINGS

- There is a growing intra-religious divide between Bangladeshi Muslims over competing claims of piety that appears to fuel religious frictions and heightened social intolerance.
- Social polarization over religious values affects nearly every facet of life in Bangladesh, drawing especially sharp lines over cultural and artistic expression.
- Growing intolerance and frictions over religious pluralism are shrinking the space for open debate, freedom of conscience and speech, and public expressions of dissent.
- Increased polarization around religious values and secularism raises the risks that extremists will exploit divisions to escalate their campaign of targeted violence.
- Universities have emerged as a key battleground as tensions over religious and political content in higher education curricula have grown.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Debates over the role of religion in public life have defined the history of Bangladesh since its independence in 1971. The recent spike in political violence across the country, however, signals a turning point in a decades-long struggle between those who consider the state to be secular and those who consider the majority-Muslim country to be associated with the principles of Islam. This conflict exceeds mainstream political differences; extremists exploit it to justify violence against minorities, outspoken critics, nonconformists, and foreigners.

In this context, and despite clear constitutional guarantees regarding basic freedoms and fundamental rights, daily battles are being waged around minority rights and freedom of speech. As these debates continue, the boundaries for open cultural and artistic expression are shrinking. Muslims have their own internal differences about what makes someone pious, how religiosity should be expressed in matters of dress, how public space should be shared between the sexes, and what the role of education might be in shaping national identity. All of these differences point to a fraying of the social fabric with clear implications for those seeking to contain and confront violent extremism.

The rights of minorities are protected under the 1972 constitution. Nevertheless, Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus are increasingly subordinating both their public and private religious practices to the sensitivities of Bangladesh's Muslim majority. Freedom of conscience is further restricted because some in the Muslim community view atheism as an affront to Islam and the sanctity of a Muslim-majority state. Muslim

conservatives are particularly concerned about trends within the mainstream media that they regard as hostile to their perspective and unfair in their portrayal of all those with a religious education as intolerant or extremist.

In this highly charged atmosphere, public expressions of Bengali nationalism have been targeted as “un-Islamic” and subject to political attack. Inter- and intra-religious frictions have sparked a growing culture of self-censorship.

Ongoing debates surrounding competing claims of piety have widened the gulf between those described as “good” and “bad” Muslims. Rock music was once seen as a progressive political force in Bangladesh that criticized authoritarianism, corruption, and religious extremism. However, many young people under the influence of Internet videos and Bangla-language Islamic books have come to regard music as “un-Islamic.” In some cases, their focus on locating a more “correct” religious path has aligned them with some of the radical preachers who are said to have inspired recent attacks.

What young people wear is perceived as a fault line of piety, but there is a perception that this dynamic works differently for men and women. Women are increasingly wearing the hijab, but traditional Islamic attire worn by men is often criticized as a marker of intolerance or narrow-mindedness. Amid these differences, young Bangladeshis have been pushing back against the view, spread by more conservative and radical Islamic groups, that men and women should not mix together in public. In this context, both progressive and conservative Muslims view the education system, particularly at the university level, as a place to counter extremism by revising existing curricula.

Understanding shifting trends in the country’s conflicts over conscience, religious identity, citizenship, and freedom of expression is vital for those with an interest in shaping more effective policies to counter violent extremism. Interventions that rely on deploying alternative narratives need to examine the growing body of evidence documenting a rapidly shifting socioeconomic landscape in Bangladesh. The research underpinning this research brief suggests four ways to improve policy responses to extremism:

- Engage, do not ignore, Muslim conservatives when crafting policy responses.
- Defend the values of diversity, democracy, and secularism.
- Support displays of, and the opportunity for, public cultural expression.
- Broaden university curricula to counter extremist ideologies.

In each of these four areas, a better understanding of the religious and ideological narratives prevailing among Bangladeshi youth is critical. This understanding is necessary to mitigate the risks of growing social intolerance and blunt the appeal of violent extremist views.

# INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has a history of political violence dating back to its struggle for independence. Recent terrorist attacks, however, have led to a reassessment of the conventional wisdom about what drives this violence, with a greater focus on trends in the political environment.<sup>1</sup> The RESOLVE Network is working to deepen the study of these factors, particularly how they are shaped by the country's history and emerging socioeconomic changes rooted in globalization.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding how increasing polarization and societal divisions have shaped social strife is important to understanding the nature of political violence in Bangladesh. The Constitution of Bangladesh, written the year following independence in 1971, defined the country's secular nationalism but named Islam as the state religion.<sup>3</sup> In the past four and a half decades, the political culture has evolved to favor Islam over secularism.<sup>4</sup> Debates about political secularism, Islam, and the relative prominence of each are a constant feature of public life. Islamists and conservative civil society groups have campaigned for the state-based enforcement of *sharia*.<sup>5</sup> Secular nationalist groups have campaigned for policies modeled on *laïcité*, the French concept of secularism.<sup>6</sup> The result has been strong disagreement over the character of the Bangladeshi state on a constitutional, political, and bureaucratic level as well as among Bangladeshi citizens.

Bangladesh faces a profound youth bulge — 30 percent of its population is between the ages of 10 and 24 — as well as intensifying economic hardship and political inequality.<sup>7</sup> Unemployment among university graduates is extremely high; a 2014 report found that nearly 50 percent of graduates were unemployed.<sup>8</sup> During the past decade, there has been intensifying political centralization as the ruling Awami League has strengthened its grip on state institutions. Some believe that the Awami League has used

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1 Matthew Nelson and Seth Oldmixon, “Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence.” RESOLVE Network, Bangladesh Research Report, no. 1, September, 2017.

2 RESOLVE Network Secretariat, “The Governance Nexus: Surveying the Research on Violent Extremism, Governance Failures, and the Quest for Political Legitimacy.” RESOLVE Network Working Paper Series 1, no. 3, June, 2017.

3 Section 2A states: “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic.” See also Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 12.

4 Maneeza Hossain, “The Rising Tide of Islamism in Bangladesh,” 67–77.

5 By “Islamist,” we refer to activists of a religious political party; these activists may use moderate, radical, and extreme methods to realize their ambitions. For example, see Mohammad Rashiduzzaman, “The Liberals and the Religious Right in Bangladesh,” *Asian Survey* 34, (1994), 974–90.

6 Habibul Khondker, “The Curious Case of Secularism in Bangladesh: What is the Relevance for the Muslim Majority Democracies?” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11, (2010), 185–20.

7 Jyoti Rahman, “Bangladesh’s Demographic ‘Youth Bulge’ — Is a ‘Revolution’ in Progress?” *Alochonaa*, March 15, 2014; “Rise of Youth,” *The Daily Star*, November 19, 2014.

8 Economist Intelligence Unit, “High University Enrolment, Low Graduate Employment: Analyzing the Paradox in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka,” January 2014.



its power to benefit supporters and persecute opponents, especially those associated with the Bangladesh National Party and its occasional Islamist ally, the Jama'at-e-Islami.<sup>9</sup>

Bangladeshi Muslim youth remain sharply divided in matters of faith. In 2013, these divisions played out on the streets of Dhaka in rival social movements: the secular Shahbagh movement and the conservative Hefazat-e-Islam (Protection of Islam) movement.<sup>10</sup> Within this polarizing context, five young Bangladeshi men armed with blades, guns, and bombs stormed the Holey Artisan Bakery in an upscale Dhaka neighborhood of Gulshan in July 2016, killing twenty-two people, including eighteen foreigners.<sup>11</sup> This attack was the largest in an anti-secular campaign spearheaded by violent extremists, now associated with more than forty killings, including attacks on secular bloggers alleged to be atheists, a US embassy employee involved in gay rights activism, and Sufi Muslims seeking to reject an overly rigid interpretation of Islam.<sup>12</sup> Since 2016, Bangladeshi law enforcement officials have arrested or killed several youth accused of terrorism. Secular youth and conservative Muslim scholars have publicly denounced terrorist attacks committed in the name of Islam, but condemnation has neither been uniform nor universal across the wider public.<sup>13</sup>

Tapping into these trends, this research brief is one in a series on Bangladesh and examines public views on the role of religion in public life. Informed by key stakeholder interviews conducted in Dhaka during May and June 2017, a literature review, and workshops sponsored by the RESOLVE Network and its partners in Bangladesh, the analysis in this brief explores how youth perceive the parameters of Islam in public life. It takes stock of their opinions about minority rights, on what is and is not “Islamic,” and on religious and secular concepts. Findings from this inquiry illuminate key narratives and concepts that should be integrated into policy responses to violent extremism in Bangladesh. Such integration will especially benefit those interventions that seek to shape the media environment, cultivating counter or alternative messaging capable of addressing and mitigating dangerous social schisms.

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9 “Controlled Democracy: Bangladesh,” *The Economist*, February 15, 2017.

10 “4 Years since the Shahbagh Movement,” *Dhaka Tribune*, February 6, 2017; Julien Bouissou, “Bangladesh’s Radical Muslims Uniting behind Hefazat-e-Islam,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2013.

11 Mubashar Hasan, “Threats of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh Are a Symptom of Deeper Social and Political Problems,” *The Conversation*, January 11, 2017.

12 Ibid.

13 “Students in Bangladesh Protest Rise of Islamic Extremism,” *Fox News*, August 1, 2016; Maaz Hussain, “Anti-Terror Fatwa Endorsed by 100,000 Bangladeshi Islamic Scholars,” *Voice of America*, June 21, 2016.

# BOUNDARIES BETWEEN SECULARISM AND RELIGION

## Subordinating Minority Rights

Contrary to conventional wisdom, secularism in Bangladesh is not divorced from religion. Instead, the youth interviewed for this research insisted that religious practice sets the framework for Bangladeshi secularism. The boundaries of pluralism are limited by a majoritarian commitment to the supremacy of Islam. One Hindu told of his experience in his home district of Narshindi, fifty kilometers northeast of Dhaka, where Hindus were compelled to reduce the volume of their temple loudspeakers during a religious festival because it overlapped with an Islamic preaching session.<sup>14</sup>

Those from religious minorities often spoke of their subordination to majoritarian notions of religious liberty. A female Hindu student living in a suburban Dhaka flat with six other women noted that her Muslim roommate, whom she described as “liberal,” from a non-Islamic educational background, and prone to skipping prayers, had removed a Hindu idol from their shared room because she believed it would undermine any Muslim prayer she might have chosen to perform. “My roommate is busy with the dignity of her own religion, but she does not think of mine,” the Hindu student complained. “She has no respect; she considers my Hindu statue merely a doll!” Despite her strong sense of grievance, however, she felt obliged to accommodate the views of her Muslim roommate.<sup>15</sup>

When these minority concerns were shared with Muslims, most were unconcerned. They saw this attitude as normal and believed that the protection of majority values was common in democracies around the world. As one leader of the Hefazat-e-Islam movement explained, “Idol-worshipers can place their idols in their private places and in their *mandirs*” — their Hindu temples. He added that Islam instructed its followers to protect the houses of worship of other religions.<sup>16</sup> Other young Muslims interviewed also saw protecting minority religious practices as part of their Islamic faith. At the same time, however, they expected religious minorities to defer to majority sentiments. As one madrasa graduate said, “I see no problem with this bias toward Islam.”<sup>17</sup> In some interviews, secularism was a democratic value associated with religious pluralism; however, secularism was not seen as incompatible with prevailing forms of religious majority rule. This understanding of majority rule was often framed in terms of the historical flexibility associated with Islamic notions of *ijma*, that is the shifting forms of internal Muslim consensus wrought by Islamic legal scholars.

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14 Interview, male Hindu youth, Dhaka, May 19, 2017.

15 Interview, female Hindu student, Dhaka, May 19, 2017.

16 Interview, male Muslim activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

17 Interview, male Madrasa student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

This focus on majoritarian religious freedom, however, risks depriving non-Muslim citizens of their equal status *vis-à-vis* Muslims. It directly contradicts Sections 11 and 12 of the Bangladeshi Constitution, which are designed to protect the dignity of every citizen and prohibit discrimination against any religion.<sup>18</sup> The double standard could create scope for extremists to manipulate such discriminatory views, moving beyond a positive bias toward Islam in order to justify the killing of infidels, a worldview that surfaced in recent terrorist attacks in Dhaka.<sup>19</sup>

## Constraining Freedom of Conscience and Speech

There was a consensus among the Muslims interviewed that atheism is an offense to Islam. Whether they described themselves as progressive or conservative, Muslim respondents believed that secularism should be controlled to ensure that no offense to their religion was committed. Although both groups felt that offending Muslim or Islamic sentiments was wrong, their reasons differed slightly.

Progressive Muslims adopted a politically cautious approach to the relationship between religion and freedom of speech. They noted that, to sustain popular support for progressive causes like religious pluralism and the right to religious dissent in a context characterized by increasing religiosity, it was politically sensible to avoid any criticism of the majority religion “in the name of being progressive.” When a few bloggers were said to have demeaned the Prophet and his followers in the name of atheism, progressive Muslim respondents felt that the idea of atheism had been diminished. A top leader of a prominent secular forum said, “I can’t proclaim myself [to be] an atheist these days. My movement includes religious people too, and they would not approve of my stance. Atheism has acquired a bad name due to the irresponsible actions of certain people.”<sup>20</sup>

Self-censorship has become increasingly widespread among progressives in response to the social disapproval surrounding certain atheist blog posts. This politically cautious mindset is seen by some as impinging on public debate and free speech. It accentuates a trend in which atheism is framed as a personal stance that offends the Muslim majority. With the perceived social influence of the majority, atheism has come to be viewed, even by many progressive Muslims, as a stance that could begin to threaten the survival of constitutional secularism. One journalist, who appears regularly on prime-time television talk shows, accused atheist bloggers of damaging the credibility of secularism. In an interview, he said, “Atheists have made the concept of secularism problematic by initiating offensive writings against Islam, as a result of which, most religious Bangladeshis, who also believe in religious harmony, have developed a distaste about these two words: secularism and atheism.”<sup>21</sup>

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18 Section 11 states: “The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed”; Section 12(d) states: “The principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.”

19 Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Uses Ramadan as Calling for New Terrorist Attacks,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016.

20 Interview, male nongovernmental organization activist, Dhaka, May 8, 2017.

21 Interview, mainstream journalist, Dhaka, May 27, 2017.

Some citizens who typically identify themselves as religiously progressive have come to believe that certain forms of free speech are increasingly restricted. One leftist student leader said he recently had to revise the content of a public speech because his approach to religion faced growing scrutiny. This self-censorship brings progressives much closer to the views of conservative Muslims, at least in public. However, it risks diluting constitutional and democratic norms by stressing the supremacy of Islam as the majority religion to the exclusion of minority values and rights as well as the need to protect Islam from perceived cultural and theological incursions. “Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, so there is no scope for offending Islam; this is non-negotiable,” said one madrassa student.<sup>22</sup> In fact, a leader associated with Hefazat-e-Islam added, referring to secular bloggers, “Their freedom of speech is [only] okay until they attack Islam; one cannot [diminish] Muslims’ freedom to practice religion with an appeal to freedom of speech.”<sup>23</sup>

On the other side of the debate, conservative Muslims were highly critical of what they saw as biased media representation of what constitutes free speech. “Whenever we see the unfortunate killing of an atheist person, it is a general trend that the participants on TV talk shows and the content of the news point to madrassa education as a source of the problem,” said one madrassa student.<sup>24</sup> Imbalances in the reporting and commentary of Bangladeshi television news programs have not gone unnoticed by local researchers.<sup>25</sup> The polarization of the media often pits religious madrassas against secular bloggers. Media coverage has exacerbated and distorted cleavages, transforming many conservative Muslims who might otherwise condemn extremism into possible suspects. Those with a madrassa education felt aggrieved because when a student educated in a mainstream school was implicated in violence, their school was not immediately blamed for their acts. Many conservative Muslims interviewed considered the portrayal of madrassas as sources of intolerance and radicalism to be inaccurate and misleading.

## Shrinking Boundaries of Cultural and Artistic Expression

Public forms of cultural and artistic expression have long served to delineate the boundaries of secular and religious space in Bangladesh. As this research brief was being prepared, public debate was dominated by efforts to remove a statue depicting a Greek goddess from the front of the Supreme Court building.<sup>26</sup> At about the same time, conservative Hefazat-e-Islam activists demanded an end to *Mongol Shovajatra* (a procession of good wishes) celebrating the Bengali New Year (*Pohela Boishakh*), calling it “un-Islamic.”

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22 Interview, Madrassa student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

23 Interview, male Islamic activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

24 Interview, Madrassa student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

25 Sheikh Mohammad Shafiul Islam, “Coverage Bias of Bangladesh Television Media: A Portrayal of Power and Politics,” *Malaysian Journal of Communication* 32 (2), (2016), 240-58; Syed Saad Andaleeb and Anis Rahman, “Television News in Bangladesh: Intersection of Market-oriented Journalism and Perceived Credibility,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 25 (2), (2015), 162-77.

26 Julfikar Ali Manik and Ellen Barry, “Statue of Woman Removed from Bangladesh’s Supreme Court,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2017.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognized this celebration as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Every year, Dhaka University's Fine Arts Institute holds the iconic procession featuring super-sized replicas of birds, owls, fish, animals, and other motifs. In response to demands from Hefazat-e-Islam, the ruling Awami League decided not to participate in the procession in 2017 — an unprecedented gesture of appeasement.<sup>27</sup>

Since independence, there has been a tension between a “Bengali” nationalism defined by language and culture, on the one hand, and a “Bangladeshi” nationalism defined by religion and territory, on the other.<sup>28</sup> The sculptures and festivals are the most recent battleground for this struggle concerning national identity. Conservative Muslims want “non-Muslim” symbols to be removed from the public sphere. Less conservative Muslims generally disagree, arguing that religion is a matter of private spirituality so there is no harm in celebrating religious diversity within the public sphere. Most of the progressive Muslim youth interviewed as part of this research argued that *Mongol Shovajatra* represented a form of humanist Bengali culture. Still, conservatives insisted that the symbols used in the processions were drawn from Hindu and not Bengali Muslim culture. One conservative interlocutor added that, while some Hindus are also Bengali, they cannot impose Bengali processions on Muslim-majority Bengalis. The idea of Muslim majoritarianism and the need to protect it from minority cultures consistently framed conservative views regarding the special status of Islam.

Symbols were often used to mark the boundary between a stronger Muslim majority culture and a weaker non-Muslim or secular minority culture. Despite the political predominance of the Awami League, conventional notions of secularism and religious neutrality were not observed as a part of majority youth culture. While supporting the removal of the Greek statue in front of the Supreme Court, for instance, a conservative Hefazat-e-Islam leader repeatedly made connections between the statue's symbolic connotation of “secular justice” and Christianity: “The state cannot impose the symbols of the Christian religion on our Muslim majority.”<sup>29</sup> Progressive Muslims considered the removal of the Greek statue and the Awami League's withdrawal from *Mongol Shovajatra* as symptoms of a pandering to Islamist sentiment and the shrinking space for public religious neutrality.<sup>30</sup>

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27 “No Mongol Shobhajatra by Awami League This Year,” *Dhaka Tribune*, April 13, 2017.

28 For more on this topic, see: Tanveer Fazal, “Religion and Language in the Formation of Nationhood in Pakistan and Bangladesh,” in *Nation and National Identity in South Asia*, ed. by S.L. Sharma and T. K Ommen (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 175-200.

29 Interview, male Islamic activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

30 Ikhtisad Ahmed, “Three More Signs That Bangladesh's Ruling Awami League Has Tightened Its Embrace of Islamism,” *Scroll.in*, April 28, 2017.

# DIFFERENCES AMONG MUSLIMS

## Music as a Dividing Line Between “Good” and “Bad” Muslims

Culture is a battleground, not only between Muslims and minorities in Bangladesh, but also among adherents of Islam. Attitudes toward music often serve as a dividing line between progressive and conservative Muslim attitudes. Many of the Bangladeshi Muslims interviewed treated rock-and-roll music as a form of un-Islamic art. Although no Qur’anic verse forbids music, those interviewed expressed the belief that musicians challenged its teachings. Even a student who played drums in a local rock band felt that he was involved in an “un-Islamic” activity; he said his religion prohibited playing musical instruments that created a sense of excitement. His band membership even produced conflict within his family: “My parents are very conservative,” he said. “They think Allah will not listen to the prayers of a musician, but even so, I carry on (with guilty feelings).”<sup>31</sup> These views reflect a commonly shared understanding sourced from the Internet — a go-to source for religious teaching — as well as Bengali-language Islamic texts found in local markets.

Rock music used to be seen as a progressive cultural and political force in Bangladesh. During the 1990s, the influence of western rock on Bangla rock was clear; some Bangladeshi musicians sported long hair and dressed in jeans, high-boots, and black T-shirts, supporting religious tolerance, democracy, and Sufi Islam. These musicians explicitly criticized authoritarianism, rampant corruption, and Wahhabi extremism. Without being anti-Islamic, these youth were at the forefront of changing social values.<sup>32</sup> With increasing religiosity, however, the boundaries have changed. Many parents forbid their children from engaging in music, especially “satanic” rock-and-roll, which is seen as outside of Islam.<sup>33</sup> Thus, music has in some cases abandoned its progressive history to become a moral marker distinguishing “good” from “bad” Muslims.

Bangladeshi young people are now more focused on interpreting the correct path of Islam than on following the latest musical trends. Much attention has been paid to the case of Maher Khan, the former guitarist of a local rock band called *Nemesi*. In a 2013 video, Khan explained why he quit the band, saying that playing music and offering prayers to Allah were contradictory, because music distracts the mind from Allah.<sup>34</sup> Khan explained that it was difficult to give up music because it was close to his heart, but he was able to do it for the love of Allah once he married a religious girl. Many of the young people interviewed shared similar views, explaining how they had shifted their attention away from enjoying popular music to

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31 Interview, male rock-band drummer, Dhaka, May 30, 2017.

32 Mubashar Hasan, “Globalisation in Bangladesh: The School of Rock and the Soldiers of God,” *The Daily Star*, June 6, 2011.

33 Mubashar Hasan, “Rock-n-Roll: Social Change and Democratization in Bangladesh,” *South Asia @ LSE*, December 4, 2015.

34 “Guidance: The Maher Khan Story,” *YouTube*, April 11, 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftD8X1mHPYI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftD8X1mHPYI).



finding the “correct” path of Islam. One woman reported that, when her brother started following radical preachers and joining Hefazat-e-Islam protests, he gave up listening to music.<sup>35</sup> The argument made by Maher Khan was similar to one made online in a widely accessed video by the Salafi preacher Zakir Naik, who is said to have influenced those involved in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack.<sup>36</sup> The fact that Naik’s PeaceTV broadcasts were suspended in Bangladesh shortly after the attacks only underscores emerging concerns regarding the powerful popular appeal of conservative social views.

Access to satellite television, the Internet, social media, and new apps have accelerated the trend towards religiosity among young people in Bangladesh. During the 1980s and 1990s, the arrival of satellite television and the Internet also coincided with the expansion of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Some Middle Eastern NGOs such as Green Crescent and Rabita al-Alam al-Islami came to the country stressing a rigid interpretation of Islam.<sup>37</sup> Compared to Sufism, democracy, and rock-and-roll during the 1990s, Salafi Islam has become increasingly influential over time. The widespread availability of Qur’an apps and religious YouTube videos produced by those described as more “authentic” Middle Eastern Muslims has been instrumental in generating sympathy for the growing influence of Salafism and Saudi-style Wahhabism.

## Piety and Progressives: Fashion as a Fault Line

Fashion choice is another fault line between progressive and conservative Muslim youth in Bangladesh. A recurring theme emerged in the interviews regarding the hijab or headscarf, which most respondents agree is increasingly worn by young women. One woman noted that, when her brother was radicalized and started associating with Hefazat-e-Islam, he forced her to wear the hijab.<sup>38</sup> To progressives, this represents a move away from the traditional South Asian sari in favor of new forms of conservative Muslim dress. Among those wearing the hijab, however, there were sharp disagreements regarding the right way to wear it, with many linking different styles of hijab to a distinction between “good” and “bad” female Muslims. “Islam is a strict religion, so if anyone wants to wear hijab for religious reasons, they should not wear it with a T-shirt, jeans, or tight-fitting dresses,” noted one hijab-wearing interviewee, adding that women who did not wear a hijab were regarded as not religious or not truly following Islam.<sup>39</sup> Progressives, including women who did not cover their hair, however, stressed the importance of individual choice and not judging the religiosity of others. Hijab-wearing interviewees dismissed such views, arguing that religious instructions favoring the hijab were clear, indicating that Islam provided no space for negotiation. This dispute was not simply sartorial; it also illuminated different progressive and conservative opinions regarding the legitimacy of holding opposing views. Intolerance towards the views of others, interviews revealed, is commonplace within the ranks of some Bangladeshi Muslim youth.

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35 Interview, family member of a late radical activist, Dhaka, May 27, 2017.

36 “If Listening to Music is Haram, Then Where Is It Stated in Holy Quran?” Dr. Zakir Naik (Urdu), *You Tube*, April 26, 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZXLOcQ-LYA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZXLOcQ-LYA).

37 Ibid.

38 Interview, family member of late radical activist, Dhaka, May 27, 2017.

39 Interview, female student, Dhaka, May 30, 2017.



# Clothing as a Maker of Stereotypes and Prejudices

The conservative shift in Muslim social norms is having an impact on perceptions regarding clothing across Bangladeshi society. One non-Muslim woman interviewed for this study said she had begun to wear a hijab only after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in the hope that she might be spared in any future attack. A young male who studied in a madrassa and wore a beard and traditional South Asian Muslim clothing, including a *Punjabi kameez* (knee-length tunic) and a *tupi* (cap), felt that he had become more socially isolated due to his religious appearance. “In public buses, people are reluctant to sit beside me,” he complained.<sup>40</sup> The negative image associated with some religious clothing has, in some cases, contributed to social segregation. Many young male interviewees said they would respond negatively if a friend wore stereotypical forms of Muslim clothing, because such men were regarded as dogmatic and socially rigid.<sup>41</sup> Non-Muslims perceived these men as intolerant to minorities. Unlike the hijab, male religious clothing, was not seen as a source of social assimilation but as an act of self-isolation from mainstream Muslim society. This negative perception was seen as contributing to fewer men wearing stereotypical Muslim clothing, whereas most of those interviewed agreed that the opposite trend had emerged among Muslim women.

## Social Contact Between Women and Men

Mixed-gender interaction is not automatically seen as un-Islamic among educated youth in Bangladesh. While Hefazat-e-Islam in 2013 demanded a formal legal ban on unmarried mixed couples in public, the youth interviewed for this study did not seem to support such a move.<sup>42</sup> One respondent recalled that a conservative Dhaka University Facebook group had recently criticized a man for publicly hugging a woman on campus, as this was seen as a “threat to the religious ethics of the country.”<sup>43</sup> Another argued that “free mixing” merely expanded the space for unethical and anti-religious activities, referring to a widely reported case of rape in Dhaka’s Raintree Hotel. It was suggested that such crimes were the inevitable consequence of free mixing. Many of the young Muslims who participated in this research, however, opposed these views and insisted that Muslim men and women should interact in a context of mutual respect. Although divergent views regarding mixed-gender interaction are frequently cited as a source of social, religious, and political cleavage in Muslim communities, research conducted for this brief revealed a rather unexpected consensus instead.

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40 Interview, male Muslim student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

41 Interviews, male Muslim university students, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

42 Julien Bouissou, “Bangladesh’s Radical Muslims Uniting behind Hefazat-e-Islam,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2013.

43 Interview, university student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

## Education and Extremism

The young Bangladeshi Muslims interviewed for this study consistently denounced violent extremism in the name of Islam. Conservatives expressed the belief that violent extremism was antithetical to Islam. They cited the leader of Hefazat-e-Islam, who repeated a familiar Qur’anic phrase that “killing one human being unjustly is like killing the entirety of humankind.” One interviewee added, “Those who kill in the name of Islam do not know Islam.”<sup>44</sup> These young Muslims felt it was important to distance themselves from violent extremists both to protect the reputation of Islam and to shield fellow Muslims from the possibility of retaliatory attacks.

Bangladesh’s divergent education system, in which students can be taught either in Bangla or English as the primary language of instruction and, for those who choose, in regulated and unregulated Islamic schooling, also complicates matters. One interviewee stressed the need for active government intervention to streamline the many different types of education in Bangladesh. “The country will eventually fall into a civil war, as our diverse educational system is creating citizens with radically different points of view,” he said.<sup>45</sup> Integrated educational curricula, he argued, should be seen as an essential part of any effort to address this this pattern of social segregation.

At the same time, however, many of the secular Muslims interviewed for this study felt that religious education should be removed from existing curricula, starting at the primary-school level. At the university-level, they noted that critical-thinking subjects like history, philosophy, political science, and art should be considered mandatory for engineering and business students. This conviction was based on a perception that engineering and business courses often failed to provide a nuanced understanding of social dynamics. This black-and-white orientation, they argued, led to closed-minded forms of religiosity that made these students more susceptible to appeals from militant outfits.

Conservative Muslims, however, countered that in order to reduce extremism Islam should be taught all the way from the primary to the tertiary level, noting that many of those arrested for violent extremism offenses were from non-religious educational backgrounds. Conservative interviewees insisted that, among Muslims with a proper understanding of Islam, terrorism was not regarded as a legitimate response to cultural or political frictions. For a Muslim-majority country, they added, Islamizing the school curricula was merely a part of their patriotic duty.

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44 Interview, Islamic activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

45 Interview, journalist, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

# OBSERVATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The views expressed by the Bangladeshi youth interviewed for this research brief illuminated four specific policy implications for the consideration of the government and international donors seeking to address violent extremism.

## Engaging Religious Conservatives

For many Bangladeshis, conservative Muslims enjoy greater credibility in matters related to Islam. At the same time, conservatives interviewed for this study made numerous cogent arguments against violent religious extremism. It appears that conservative Muslims may be willing and able to play a more active role in countering violent extremism. It is important that the Bangladeshi government and international donors are careful not to stigmatize or marginalize conservative Muslims: they may be important allies.

## Defending Diversity, Democracy, and Secularism

It is important that the Bangladeshi state maintain its support for secular constitutional principles to prevent a further shrinking of the public space for pluralism and minority religious or non-religious rights. The government and its international partners need to work to protect a diverse and democratic public sphere. Shrinking space for political expression threatens to create an ideological and political vacuum, pushing dissent underground and making those outside the mainstream vulnerable to extremist exploitation. The state needs to protect legitimate forms of opposition while cultivating institutionalized spaces for young Bangladeshi participation. A starting point could involve allowing elections for the student unions of many public-sector universities.

## Protecting Cultural Expression

Artistic and cultural expression needs to be protected from those who seek to limit what they see as offensive or “un-Islamic” forms of speech. It is important that the state work with Muslim and non-Muslim leaders to stress its neutrality in matters of religious, cultural, and political expression. The active protection of free speech as described in law can help to mitigate forms of self-censorship resulting from a fear of vigilante violence.

At the same time, mainstream Bangladeshi media need to be careful not to conflate Muslim conservatism with extremism. Demonizing conservative Muslims reduces the media’s credibility with the wider population, minimizes the role that mainstream media could play in public debate, and pushes citizens to online sources of information. Engagement with extremist social media in Bangladesh, has the potential to increase. Online forums such as Facebook and religious blogs are growing increasingly popular for those

with an interest in expressing religious views and engaging in religious dialogue. Enhanced understanding of broadcast and online media is particularly important for those seeking to inform culturally-appropriate messaging campaigns to counter and prevent violent extremism.

## Broadening University Curricula

Some private universities have started to diversify their curricula and make liberal education mandatory for all students. It would also be worthwhile for all universities to require studies that combine accessible forms of high-level religious instruction with an awareness of politics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and world history.<sup>46</sup> This approach could make it harder for extremist recruiters to attract students with their simplistic narratives of religion, world history, and politics.

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46 See also Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

# CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory research shows how Bangladeshi youth draw conceptual, social, and political boundaries with respect to religion. The narratives presented illuminate some of the deeper meanings surrounding politically charged vocabularies in Bangladesh, focusing on such concepts as secularism, religion, and extremism. Understanding these narratives and the effects they have within society at large is a crucial first step in the development of effective policies and practices seeking to stem the expansion of violent extremism.

The findings from the research highlight the importance of shaping policy responses that engage conservative Muslims; uphold the values of diversity, democracy, and secularism; protect cultural expression; and broaden university curricula in ways that counter and ultimately prevent violent extremism. The findings also suggest important trends to monitor in future research, including how youth define “good” or “bad” Muslims, which ideas promote (and counter) the increasing polarization of Bangladeshi society, and how expanding use of the Internet influences the exchange of ideas and extremist narratives.

For policymakers and practitioners, attention to the role that narratives surrounding religion, secularism, and public life play in fostering or mitigating social polarization and violent extremism is critical. The extent to which alternative narrative campaigns are effective depends, in large part, on the degree to which they are informed by rigorous research and insight into the views driving existing schisms within Bangladesh today.

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# Can Community Policing Help Counter Violent Extremism in Bangladesh?

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# KEY FINDINGS

- The widening trust deficit between police and local communities presents a significant security challenge for Bangladesh.
- Community policing could enhance cooperation to address violent extremism at the local level.
- Community members are concerned about violent extremism and have conflicting views about their role in community policing and the role of youth.
- Community policing policy and practice should include guidance on addressing violent extremism, enhanced training, and coordination with government and local institutions.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community policing in Bangladesh is a potentially effective vehicle to improve security and complement the fight against violent extremism. The Bangladesh police have developed a structure for involving local communities in initiatives to prevent crime and improve security. Program implementation, however, has been experimental, haphazard, and under-resourced. Reports of police abuses and a widespread perception of a lack of accountability amid escalating clashes between police and suspected extremists exacerbate the situation. These factors have combined to limit the effectiveness of community policing as a tool to contain the extremist threat.

Despite these challenges, local communities in Bangladesh are concerned about the problem of violent extremism, and many want to help the police. The Bangladesh police need to reconsider their top-down approach to community engagement. Police need to adopt stronger policies to ensure closer alignment of strategies to bolster citizen support for rule of law and tactics to address local violence. They need to work harder to build trust with citizens, including minorities who are often the victims of violent extremism. Community policing needs to be understood not as a formula for the political cooptation of powerful local elites, but as a means to erase the trust deficit between the police and the public at large.

A successful community policing approach to countering violent extremism relies on making police responsible for coordinating with the community when conducting police work, building strong partnerships with a broad cross-section of the public, and having an orientation that emphasizes non-emergency services and surveillance. Since 2008, Bangladesh's police have declared community policing to be an "essential part" of initiatives to reduce crime, increase public safety, ensure road safety, and improve community relations. There is a gap, however, between the theory and practice of community policing in Bangladesh. "Walking the beat" and conducting public outreach are often relegated to part-time jobs for regular officers. Police engagement is often structured around numerous ceremonial events. To be

effective in preventing and counteracting violent extremism, community policing needs to move from the periphery to the center of an integrated strategy for law enforcement.

Evidence indicates that community policing does work in Bangladesh and that those participating in more active and energized groups see its potential to contribute to countering violent extremism. Community Policing Forums, which facilitate communication between community members and the police, as well as increase community involvement in law enforcement efforts to address crime, have already been mobilized to address gang violence. More than just gang violence, however, participants in Community Policing Forums are also concerned about rising extremism. Suggestions from the local level exist regarding how to improve these structures to better address new threats through recruiting new members to these Forums.

If the Bangladesh police are to improve community policing and make it more effective in the fight against violent extremists, then significant changes are needed. Reducing rivalries and promoting cooperation among law enforcement agencies within different police units and bureaus will enhance coordination. Strategy and policy documents, such as the police counterterrorism and community policing plans, need to acknowledge the respective roles of agencies and outline how and under what circumstances they could work together.

The status of community policing as a law enforcement tool needs to be elevated within the police structure and in the national government. Community policing needs to become more action-oriented and interactive and less passive and ceremonial. Community Policing Forums need to better reflect the diversity of local areas. All of these reforms require better education and training for police and local community partners, as well as increased resources devoted to these improvements. The continuing support of the international community is essential to implement such ongoing reforms.

# INTRODUCTION

As Bangladesh grapples with new threats from homegrown militants, questions are starting to surface regarding how this phenomenon can be explained and how emerging trends in politics and society might influence violent extremism.<sup>1</sup> The July 2016 attacks on an upscale restaurant in Dhaka and during Eid prayers in Kishoreganj put pressure on law enforcement agencies and security forces to respond.<sup>2</sup> Led by the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTC) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), authorities have increased their efforts by cracking down on suspected terrorist units throughout the country. However, the effectiveness of current security sector approaches in addressing violent extremism in Bangladesh is under debate.<sup>3</sup> As part of the Police Reform Programme that began in January 2005, increasing attention has been given to enhancing security in Bangladesh through a sustainable police-citizen partnership.<sup>4</sup> Since 2009, Bangladesh police have been committed to a reform program that includes the promotion of community policing.<sup>5</sup> From 2009 to 2012, the Bangladesh police worked to institutionalize community policing in each police station; a community police officer was assigned to monitor the activities of Community Policing Forums and conduct occasional open house days in collaboration with the local communities. These Forums are drawn from the inhabitants of local districts or metropolitan areas. The Forums serve as focal points to facilitate healthier public-police interaction and strengthen community involvement in crime reduction. The 2010 community policing strategy that framed this approach focuses on helping “the police and community to work closely together in new ways to solve the problems of crime, fear of crime, physical and social disorder, and neighborhood decay.”<sup>6</sup> The strategy does not mention terrorism or extremism.

When it came to power in 2009, the Awami League (AL) government gave the RAB the task of combating terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Then, in early 2016, the national Bangladesh police force formed a specialized unit to address violent extremism. The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit was tasked with preventing the rise of violent extremism, including attacks on bloggers, publishers, foreigners, and minorities. After the July 2016 attacks, the CTTC proposed a nationwide expansion of its jurisdiction.<sup>8</sup> In the year following the two attacks, by one count, authorities had killed ninety-three alleged terrorists.<sup>9</sup>

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1 Matthew Nelson and Seth Oldmixon, 2017. “Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence,” RESOLVE Network *Bangladesh Research Report* No.1, September.

2 See Julhas Alam, “Bangladesh Marks Anniversary of Café Attack That killed 22,” *Associated Press*, July 1, 2017; “Bangladesh Blast, Gun Battle Kills 4 during Eid Prayers,” *Associated Press*, July 7, 2016.

3 Nelson and Oldmixon, “Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence,” 2017.

4 For background, see UNDP, Police Reform Programme (Phase II) project document, October 25, 2009.

5 Bangladesh Police, “Community Policing: National Strategy for Bangladesh,” 2010.

6 *ibid.*, 3.

7 See “About Us,” Rapid Action Battalion, [www.rab.gov.bd/english/about-us](http://www.rab.gov.bd/english/about-us).

8 Mohammad Jamil Khan and Shariful Islam, “Counterterrorism: Police To Get Complete Unit,” *The Daily Star*, April 30, 2017.

9 See: South Asian Terrorism Portal, *Fatalities-Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh*, [www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/data base/Fatalities-Islamist%20Terrorism%202010.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/data%20base/Fatalities-Islamist%20Terrorism%202010.htm) (accessed June 19, 2017).

This research brief examines how those involved in community policing understand countering violent extremism and the extent to which a community policing approach might play a role in addressing violent extremism. The brief primarily considers two major urban areas in Dhaka City Corporation that are proximate to major educational institutions and have a large youth population: Chawkbazar in Dhaka South, where Community Policing Forums are no longer active; and Uttara in Dhaka North, where the Forums are active.

Chawkbazar, a densely populated neighborhood in the southern part of the capital of Dhaka known as the “Old City,” is home to a renowned 400-year-old market. Although the area is predominantly Muslim, it contains a large cross-section of Hindus and a smattering of other religious minorities. Light industry devoted to the production of garments and plastics forms the center of economic life. There are few examples of shared cultural activities or community activity. An older, pre-independence form of community organization called *pancahyet* still exists, but prominent community members focused more of their attention on their mercantile activities.

Uttara is a satellite town built in the 1990s with more clearly defined sectors. Social welfare associations dominated by local landlords provide neighborhood security, coordinate garbage collection, and organize festivities on national days. The leadership of the local associations is elected. As such, when community police came to Uttara, there was already a ready-made set of local leaders to involve in the Community Policing Forums. Uttara is a particularly useful case study because police have worked with community networks to deal with issues associated with youth gangs. Community Policing Forum members have been directly involved in helping to address this gang-related law enforcement challenge. The scope of this brief has several limitations. It is primarily based on key informant interviews with serving police officers and community members in Chawkbazar and Uttara. Neither of the areas has prominent minority community leadership and minority groups are not represented in the Community Policing Forums. Additionally, this brief does not examine the activities of the CTTC or RAB, with their special antiterrorism mandates, although both are an ever-present feature of law enforcement in Bangladesh.

It is hoped that this research will highlight some of the gaps in community policing practices and offer recommendations as to how this area of law enforcement could be better used to counter violent extremism in Bangladesh.

# COMMUNITY POLICING MANDATES, INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES, AND LOCAL STANDARDS

An atmosphere of mutual suspicion between police and local citizens has been a pervasive feature of law enforcement in Bangladesh for decades. Citizens have traditionally kept their distance from the police, often due to fear of abuses or fear of solicitation for bribes. Civil society groups have accused the police of being responsible for about one-third of extrajudicial killings following the declaration of a state of emergency in 2007.<sup>10</sup> Female victims of sexual crimes have been reluctant to report those crimes to the police, fearing further harassment from officers.<sup>11</sup> Police have also been accused of standing by when organized attacks are directed against minorities such as Buddhist, Hindu, or indigenous groups.<sup>12</sup> The resulting distrust has led to an underreporting of crime and violence to local authorities and an inaccurate reflection of crime and violence in national statistics.<sup>13</sup>

Factors such as these precipitated recommendations to the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Bangladesh police that law enforcement reforms be developed to address perceptions of police corruption and inefficiency.<sup>14</sup> The government's effort to take up these reforms in 2008, combined with an urgent need to bridge the trust deficit between police and the public, led to structural reforms in the security sector, including the introduction of community policing programs in 2009.

Community policing involves law enforcement officials having regular and direct contact with the public through informal interactions, structured consultations, and partnerships with community stakeholders.<sup>15</sup> In what is a community-oriented and problem-solving approach, the open exchange of information is central to a nuanced understanding of the community-police relationship.<sup>16</sup> A successful community policing approach to countering violent extremism relies on several factors:

- Assigning a community police officer to coordinate between communities and mainstream policing agencies,

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10 Submission of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) for the Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh, September 2008, 3.

11 Summary prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to the Human Rights Council resolution 16/21, A/HRC/WG.6/16/BGD/3, January 29, 2013, 4.

12 Ibid, 9.

13 Baseline Survey on Personal Security and Police Performance in Bangladesh: Summary Report, Police Reform Programme, December 2011, 4.

14 Ibid, 8.

15 Rick Sarre, "The State of Community Policing in Australia: Some Emerging Themes," in *Australian Policing: Contemporary Issues*, ed. Duncan Chappell and Paul Wilson, (North Ryde: Butterworths, 1996), 26–41.

16 Cameron Sumpter, *Community Policing to Counter Violent Extremism: Evident Potential and Challenging Realities*, (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2016), 13.

- Establishing diverse policing teams,
- Engaging communities through broad outreach while developing transparent partnerships with the public, and
- Reorienting patrol activities to emphasize non-emergency services and surveillance.<sup>17</sup>

It is also recommended that mainstream counterterrorism efforts integrate community policing approaches to develop a community information hub informing law enforcement and crime prevention activities.<sup>18</sup>

The national Bangladesh police force is a highly bureaucratic organization built on a top- down structure, which, according to colonial era laws, is only accountable to political and civil administrative executives of the state.<sup>19</sup> Since 2008, the Bangladesh police force has declared community policing to be an “essential part of its organization.”<sup>20</sup> The objectives of the 2010 National Strategy for Community Policing in Bangladesh are as follows:

- Reduce crime and victimization and thereby maintain public safety in local areas,
- Ensure road safety and traffic management in local areas, and
- Improve the quality of police service in consultation with locals.<sup>21</sup>

The Strategy does not suggest any specialized provisions regarding the role of community policing to counter violent extremism.

When the most recent phase of the Police Reform Programme began in 2010, one of the key challenges it faced was a low level of support among the mid-level and junior ranks. Some of those interviewed felt that community policing programs were donor- driven, but at the same time, there is said to be a high degree of national ownership at the police headquarters level. The source of existing challenges may be less about who funds the programs, and more about the ongoing communication gap between the center and the periphery of the police bureaucracy.<sup>22</sup> When the community policing program began, many government agencies, business leaders, local communities, and nongovernmental organizations were not fully aware of the intentions of the Bangladesh police to reform itself.<sup>23</sup>

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17 OSCE, *Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Community-Policing Approach*, (Warsaw: OSCE, 2014).

18 Martin Innes, “Policing Uncertainty: Countering Terror through Community Intelligence and Democratic Policing,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 605, no. 1, (2006): 222-41.

19 Government of Bangladesh, *The Police Act (Act V of 1861)*, Dhaka: GoB, 1861, [http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/pdf\\_part.php?id=12](http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/pdf_part.php?id=12) (accessed September 6, 2017).

20 Bangladesh Police, *Strategic Plan 2012-14*, 6.

21 Bangladesh Police, *Community Policing: National Strategy for Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Police Reform Programme, 2010), 3.

22 The Asia Foundation, “Community Policing Assessment: Progress and Opportunities in Bangladesh,” (March 2013), 4.

23 UNDP, *Police Reform Programme (Phase II) project document*, October 25, 2009, 3-4.



The 2011 Community Policing Service Manual of Bangladesh sought to amend the country's highly centralized model of policing by proposing that local communities and citizens hold local police accountable.<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Home Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-supported Police Reform Programme have also stressed the importance of “consolidat[ing] community policing and crime prevention” through strengthening community-police relations.<sup>25</sup> Participants in Community Policing Forums that were interviewed for this study also saw potential in promoting information exchanges and bridging the divide between the communities and the police.<sup>26</sup>

Strengthening oversight and accountability has been a key part of Bangladesh's decade-long police reform program. The case for legal reforms has been made for some time, including the case for the creation of a police complaints commission.<sup>27</sup> Community policing has been seen as an additional way to make officers more accountable to the public.<sup>28</sup> The fight against terrorism and violent extremism has continued to highlight a lack of accountability in Bangladesh, particularly regarding the excessive use of deadly force by authorities against suspected extremists. Beyond general statements regarding the value of community policing, however, as of yet, there are no publicly available policy documents that provide guidance on how the police, the RAB, or other law enforcement agencies might use community policing approaches in their counterterrorism and counter violent extremism operations.

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24 Bangladesh Police. *Community Policing Service Manual*, Dhaka, Bangladesh Police, 2011.

25 UNDP, “Annual Report 2013,” Police Reform Programme II, (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, 2014).

26 Author interview, Community Policing Forum members, Chawkbazar, May 30, 2017.

27 UNDP, Police Reform Programme (Phase II) project document, October 25, 2009, 4.

28 Bangladesh Police, “Community Policing: National Strategy for Bangladesh,” 2.

# COMMUNITY POLICING PRACTICES IN BANGLADESH

## Community Policing Forums

In a 2011 baseline survey in Bangladesh, almost sixty percent of respondents said they did not know how to contact police if they needed to do so.<sup>29</sup> Community policing is regarded as a way to bridge such gaps between police officers and the people they are supposed to serve. In 2012, a new post was created at the Assistant Inspector General level to monitor the progress of community policing nationwide in Bangladesh.<sup>30</sup> Headquarters transmitted orders to appoint community police officers in every police station to strengthen the central command system.<sup>31</sup>

In collaboration with their superiors in each station, community police officers were instructed to select Community Policing Forum members and organize events, including monthly meetings and police open house days. In addition to their regular duties, community police officers are expected to oversee the Forums in their jurisdictions. These officers often lack the experience, time, and resources to properly coordinate all of the activities that they are ordered to complete.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the officers interviewed for this study hardly received any training on how to incorporate youth in community policing and in activities to counter violent extremism in their communities.<sup>33</sup>

Police headquarters did not provide any formal guidelines to support the selection of Community Policing Forum members. Members are usually local political leaders or well-regarded local entrepreneurs. In Chawkbazar, police identified local elites on the basis of their societal reputations, political connections, and past records as community gatekeepers. In some places, this selection process has generated criticism among the elected representatives of local bodies; for example, the members of Upazila (subdistrict) and Union Parishads, felt that their authority over the police administration was being usurped by unelected Forum members. In fact, local political party leaders often opposed community policing as an unnecessary interference in their ties to local police.<sup>34</sup> No prominent minorities were represented in the two Forums examined in this research brief; however, in other parts of Dhaka that have a concentrated Hindu-minority population, it has been observed that Hindus have joined such groups and that their participation helps to improve community-police relations.

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29 Baseline Survey on Personal Security and Police Performance in Bangladesh: Summary Report, Police Reform Programme, December 2011, 15.

30 UNDP, “Annual Report 2013,” 13.

31 Ibid.

32 Razzak Raza, “Community Policing: A Practical Strategy,” *The Daily Star*, April 11, 2008.

33 Author interviews, community police officers, Uttara, May 15 and 17, 2017, and Chawkbazar, May 24, 2017.

34 See M. N. H. Zaman, “Community Policing: Potentials and Impediments,” *The Financial Express*, March 30, 2013; International Crisis Group, “Bangladesh: Getting Police Reform on Track,” Asia Report no. 157, December 11, 2009.

The judgment of police in selecting Forum members continues to be openly questioned. Police say they are selecting “clean” local political leaders.<sup>35</sup> However, in a May 2017 National Parliament debate, a ruling party member posed a question to the Home Minister about why station chiefs were selecting “drug peddlers, dishonest businessmen, and powerful local goons” for the Forums.<sup>36</sup> Although the minister defended the local police station’s control of the Community Policing Forums, this policy has continued to raise concern about the credibility of existing Forums, their growing partisan nature, and the ability of members to exploit them for personal or political advantage. This perception of credibility matters because of its impact on the strength of police-community relations.

## Youth and Community Policing

Community policing mandates in Bangladesh do not provide any guidelines to address specific issues related to youth. In two Community Policing Forums studied for this research, only three of twenty-four members were younger than thirty-five years of age.<sup>37</sup> In a country where there is a notable youth bulge, this pattern of exclusion could have negative implications, particularly given that those in this age group are most likely to engage in criminal activities and to emerge as the victims of crime.<sup>38, 39</sup>

Forum members and community police officers interviewed for this study offered divergent responses about their understanding of the role of youth in community policing. They unanimously agreed on the need for the greater involvement of young people in community policing practices; however, their comments often revealed deep attitudinal and generational divides. They criticized young men and women for mixing in public; for using technology, including Internet-enabled smartphones; and for what they perceived to be a lack of pious behavior. These views also seemed at odds with the views expressed by young people themselves.<sup>40</sup> In some cases, it was noted that police focused on judging morality as much as they did on solving crime.<sup>41</sup> One community police officer noted that:

Young people are exploiting the freedom that they received from their family. They have many friends and are spending unaccountable time with them. They do not show respect to the elders of the community. They smoke cigarettes openly in front of them. Young boys and girls walk together holding their hands on the street, and they do not care what the elders think about their behavior. A smart cell phone is another tool that spoils them. They spend so much time in the world of [the] Internet, and the

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35 Author interview, community police officer, Chawkbazar, May 24, 2017.

36 Author interview, Assistant Inspector General, Bangladesh Police, Dhaka, June 3, 2017.

37 The National Youth Policy defines youth in Bangladesh as between 18-35 years. See Department of Youth Development, National Youth Policy 2015, (Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh, 2015).

38 James Forman Jr., “Community Policing and Youth as Assets,” *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 95, no. 1 (2004), 1-48.

39 Sally Atkinson-Sheppard, “The Gangs of Bangladesh: Exploring Organized Crime, Street Gangs, and ‘Illicit Child Labourers’ in Dhaka,” *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 16, no. 2, (2015), 233-49.

40 Ibid.

41 RESOLVE-CGS (DU) interview, constable of Bangladesh Police, Rajshahi, May 4, 2017.

parents are unable to monitor them. Some are addicted to illegal drug consumption and trade. We get information on *yaba* [a tablet mix of methamphetamine and caffeine], which is a big problem for the young people now these days.<sup>42</sup>

Bangladesh has grown rapidly in the past two decades, become globalized, and developed new labor-intensive industries that have resulted in rapid urbanization. The intense rate of socioeconomic change has been amplified by the arrival of satellite television, the Internet, and social media apps. Others in the RESOLVE Network have also highlighted the need to study the effect of these changes.<sup>43</sup> Community Policing Forum members, most of whom are older in age, expressed concerns about the impact of these changes on the country's social fabric and on the morals of young people. As a member of a Community Policing Forum in Chawkbazar explained:

Our parents are unable to bring up their children properly. They provide everything to their children whatever they have wanted, (but) need to be more careful about what their children are doing. We from the outside of the family cannot offer a proper solution if the family is not proactive in preventing these problems. Now, young people are spending a good amount of time online. They close their doors and spend the whole night on the laptop. Do the parents know what they are doing online?<sup>44</sup>

Not all Forum members shared this view of the country's young people. Some acknowledged that contemporary youth are actually more educated and tech-savvy, more creative and, in general, more interested in becoming educated and building their careers.<sup>45</sup> Police had some positive views of youth as well; one officer stationed near a university observed that students from rural areas were often engaged in mitigating social disputes and promoting sports and cultural activities.<sup>46</sup>

Community Policing Forum members understood their role as the eyes and ears of the police, but saw their own capacities as limited. "Spoilers" engaged in organized criminal activities and youth engaged in faith-based extremist activities require extra attention. Families, schools, and universities were thought to have a role in monitoring such "spoilers," but, as one interviewee noted, "Authorities of educational institutions in Uttara are reluctant to cooperate with the Forum to figure out an effective strategy to observe the activities of youth."<sup>47</sup> This narrow "us versus them" perspective views issues associated with youth as a problem that is worth discussing, but does not acknowledge how young people might be involved in community policing or how mechanisms could be set up to support that involvement. The Forums need to become inclusionary groups, where youth as well as religious and ethnic minorities can participate and feel welcomed.

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42 Author interview, community police officer, Uttara West, May 17, 2017.

43 Nelson and Oldmixon, "Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence," 2017.

44 Author interview, Community Policing Forum member, Chawkbazar, May 28, 2017.

45 Author interview, Community Policing Forum member, Uttara West, May 17, 2017.

46 RESOLVE-CGS (DU) interview, constable, Bangladesh Police, Sylhet, May 8, 2017.

47 Author interview, President, Community Policing Forum, Uttara West, May 17, 2017.

## Growing Concerns About Extremism

The Community Policing Forum members interviewed for this study expressed concerns about growing extremism in Bangladesh, but they had differing views about whether they had role in countering it. In Chawkbazar, where the Forum has not been functioning well, members claimed that they had received no specific instructions from local or central police authorities on how to address violent extremism after the July 2016 terrorist incidents. The police on duty were alert to the threat, but none of the community police officers interviewed saw any role for their civilian counterparts. One community police officer stated:

The Forums cannot take responsibility to curb down the threat of present-day extremism. The community policing approach cannot tackle the immediate threats. They may be used to take some preventive measures, but who will provide their security? Contemporary terrorism is an international network. To address such issues, we need to better coordinate within the departments of the police. Community policing can play an initial role; however, it is not effective in executing the actual task of curbing violent extremism.<sup>48</sup>

From this interviewee's perspective, community policing may be useful for society-wide efforts to prevent terrorism, but committed terrorists need to be "properly handled" by the law enforcement agencies. Efforts to confront violent extremism, he felt, required a focus on police-centric surveillance mechanisms.<sup>49</sup>

A more collaborative approach to community policing is possible, however, and may provide a new model for dealing with violent extremism. Where Forums are active and engaged, such as in Uttara, the police feel they get positive results from collaborating with local communities. In 2016, for instance, the combined efforts of Uttara's sector welfare associations and its Community Policing Forums contributed to successfully stopping serious gang-based conflicts among school-aged youth.<sup>50</sup> Police have requested that Forum members provide information about any residents who are already engaged in or could potentially become involved in any suspicious activities in their communities. Forum members have welcomed such requests. During interviews, one Community Policing Forum official expressed that:

*Jongibad* [extremism] is like cancer and it is spreading from within the society. We have many things to do from the Forum. Terrorists are living in our building premises and within our community. In 2016, the police raided a terrorist hideout in Ashkona, which is very close to Uttara. It was the landlord of the household who informed the local guard and the news was transmitted to the police. It is important that we strengthen our own surveillance system to support the police.<sup>51</sup>

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48 Author interview, community police officer, Chawkbazar, May 24, 2017.

49 Author interview, community police officer, Chawkbazar, May 24, 2017.

50 Author interview, additional police Superintendent, Uttara Zone, May 11, 2017. For more details on gang war in Uttara, see: Golam Mortuza Dhruo, "'Gang Rivalry' behind Murder of Schoolboy Adnan Kabir in Uttara," *Bdnews24.com*, January 8, 2017.

51 Author interview, President, Community Policing Forum, Uttara, May 17, 2017.

Police in Uttara appreciated the benefit of an alliance with the community to address violent extremism. “It is difficult to conclude that traditional policing can wipe off terrorism from its root without the help of the community. People of the community are feeling threatened due to the rise of faith-based extremism,” said one officer.<sup>52</sup> This community-police relationship offers practical benefits. Police do not have direct access to all apartment buildings, and Forum members have much wider contacts for gathering and exchanging information. In Uttara, the police were able to act on the information they received from local security patrols regarding drug dealers.

The philosophy of community policing views everyone as a possible partner in developing and executing public security measures. Local residents have a vested interest in enhancing the security of their own neighborhoods, and police need to build trust and actively engage them in improving public safety.<sup>53</sup> In Uttara, police have been more active in organizing members of the Forums and have identified an active local welfare association to facilitate them. Some members share multiple portfolios in local government, political parties, and community forums. There is an active civic life within which the Community Policing Forums are able to connect.<sup>54</sup> In Chawkbazar, however, the relationship between the Forum and the local government is weaker, and interactions are more limited and, often, ceremonial. Forum members rarely work together to improve the safety and security of the community.<sup>55</sup> Interviewees stressed that the behavior of the police is an important variable in improving police-community relations. However, field level officers—such as constables, assistant subinspectors, and subinspectors—are often regarded as rude and uncivil in their day-to-day interactions with local residents. When this happens, the possibility of a strong and effective community-police partnership is placed in jeopardy.

Pre-existing government and community structures can improve the viability of community policing. Local political activists have long been important sources of information about criminal activities and social disputes.<sup>56</sup> However, it is important to remember that this information has the potential to be biased or politically motivated to serve the vested interest of local political leaders. In some cases, older community structures coexist with new Community Policing Forums. In the older neighborhood of Chawkbazar, for example, each ward has a *panchayet* or local council. “We are involved in resolving local crises—family or social issues—that are brought by the citizens of the community,” noted one *panchayet* member. “We often refer cases to police stations that are beyond our jurisdiction. People come to us and inform what is happening in their neighborhood.”<sup>57</sup>

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52 Author interview, community police officer, Uttara, May 17, 2017.

53 See: International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Using Community Policing to Counter Violent Extremism: 5 Key Principles for Law Enforcement*, (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014), 3-5.

54 Author interview, Community Policing Forum member, Uttara, May 16, 2017.

55 Author interview, Community Policing Forum member, Chawkbazar, May 30, 2017.

56 Author interview, Community Policing Forum member, May 28, 2017.

57 *Panchayet* is a committee formed with local gatekeepers and elite members of the community. *Panchayat* is not a common system in the urban or rural local governance of Bangladesh. This was initially practiced in some areas of the older part of Dhaka. In some of these areas, it is still used to conduct alternative dispute resolution. However, these areas also have formal local government authorities.

Given the different purposes they serve, it is unclear whether it is always desirable to institutionalize the relationship between local communities and the police. Community Policing Forums, which have some overlap of membership with existing community organizations, including *panchayets*, can become clearing houses for information related to the community. It is important that the goals, tasks, and responsibilities of these community groups vis-à-vis the police are clearly defined in any efforts to counter violent extremism.



# COMMUNITY POLICING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: A WAY FORWARD

A community policing approach alone cannot prevent violent extremism. Bangladeshi community police officers do not have the skills or the expertise of counterterrorism police. The use of community gatekeepers to conduct covert surveillance may risk stigmatizing leaders in a way that could be counterproductive in wider efforts to mobilize communities against extremism. However, the interviews from and brief case studies of community policing in Chawkbazar and Uttara examined in this research brief suggest that—with better interagency cooperation and less rivalry—community policing could be improved and could provide important information to law enforcement authorities.<sup>58</sup> This research brief identified a number of policy changes that the Bangladesh police could consider to better utilize community policing in their efforts to prevent and address violent extremism.

## Updating Strategy and Policy Documents

The National Strategy for Community Policing in Bangladesh and the Community Policing Service Manual both need to be updated with clear guidelines for Community Policing Forums and community police officers with respect to countering violent extremism. These policy documents need to clearly state how counterterrorism or other mainstream policing approaches relate to community policing. However, any clarification of this relationship cannot undermine the fundamental reasons that community policing is also beneficial for general security.

## Building Trust with the Wider Community

Police do not need to be selective in maintaining relationships with their communities. Courting elites or gatekeepers and marginalizing large parts of society can create distrust and misunderstanding, thereby undermining the goal and effectiveness of community policing. An improved approach would be to broaden communication to a larger number of community members and to move beyond formal community policing structures, such as the Forums. This process could include incorporating women, minorities, and young people into outreach and communications strategies. It is important that minority communities are actively invited to participate in these structures. Protecting minorities from extremist violence needs to be one of the objectives of a community policing strategy. Local police stations, in collaboration with the Forums, could explore ways to work with young people, perhaps through greater cooperation with educational institutions.

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<sup>58</sup> “CTTC Contradicts RAB over Extremists,” *The New Age*, October 27, 2016.

## Improving the Mutual Exchange of Information

Police could be more proactive in facilitating the engagement of their community policing structures in countering violent extremism. This process could involve improving the mutual exchange of information, rather than simply relying on the communities to provide ad hoc information. Police could use these formal networks to better explain policies, strategies, and approaches to countering violent extremism. They could develop written policies on counterterrorism tactics and terrorism alerts and share these materials with Forum members and local government representatives to increase public scrutiny of and confidence in law enforcement authorities. Forum members and community leaders could work to better connect police to pre-existing networks of neighborhood laborers who have a better understanding of community dynamics and trends, and who may be useful providers of information.

## Increasing the Recognition of Community Policing

Community policing is given a low priority nationally, which results in few incentives for effective practice at local levels. Forum members and community police officers report that police headquarters and the Bangladeshi government do not recognize their contributions to security. There is no system of rewards or official recognition for the hard work of community police officers in their departments, nor is there for Forum members. Additionally, officers are discouraged from taking on the extra work that community policing requires. Forum members interviewed did not expect financial support, but they did want government recognition for their voluntary contributions. They also want the police to acknowledge the risks they take by cooperating with authorities and to be prepared to ensure their security, if required.

## Encouraging a Regular and Action-Oriented Relationships

Open house days and other social gatherings sponsored by the police need to be better organized and implemented more regularly. The Community Policing Forums, rather than the police alone, could be empowered to schedule such meetings. Forums need to be able to arrange more programs with different stakeholders and to exchange information on pressing issues related to extremism within communities. It is also important to formulate a clear working plan for community police officers and Forum members so that such meetings are more than opportunities for ceremonial briefings. Attendees should leave the meetings with a clear understanding of what was discussed and with concrete action points detailing how they can contribute to improving security in their neighborhoods.

## Boosting Interagency Coordination and Cooperation

The CTTC unit and Community Policing Desk need to jointly formulate a strategy to counter violent extremism. Such a protocol could demarcate the respective roles and responsibilities in investigations related to violent extremism as well as explain how community-oriented and intelligence-led policing approaches interact. The relationship between community policing and the RAB units that take the lead on counterterrorism actions needs to be delineated. Coordination on addressing violent extremism moving

forward should also include institutions in addition to law enforcement agencies. School and university representatives could be asked to join Community Policing Forums. These educational institutions can make valuable contributions to public security, and their inclusion could boost their cooperation with law enforcement agencies.

## Improving the Training of Community Policing Actors

It is important that Community Policing Forum members receive training on basic community policing approaches. Such training needs to be institutionalized and coordinated across the nation to avoid misunderstandings and improve effectiveness. Community police officers need basic training on national and international standards of human rights, on gender sensitivity, on the threat posed by extremism, and on the counterextremism approaches used by national level agencies. Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime Unit officers need training on community-oriented counterterrorism measures and human rights principles, as well as the application of these in their operational responsibilities. The Bangladesh police need to implement a long-term plan to train all field-level officers so that they share a basic understanding of the community policing approach.

# FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The challenges raised in this research brief illuminate gaps and specific areas for future inquiry for international and domestic policymakers and practitioners.

- It is important to study the level of trust between communities and the police, exploring how this level evolves, particularly in light of heavy-handed police tactics. It is also important to track community attitudes that perceive the police as partisan or corrupt.
- The role of community policing in protecting women and minorities, such as Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Shia, and the Ahmadiyya from extremist violence is relatively unexplored and merits further consideration.
- More work is needed to help domestic policymakers find a balance between an aggressive response to an imminent threat of violent extremism and a long-term initiative of proactive community-level policing to counter the foundations or drivers of extremist ideology.

# CONCLUSIONS

Community policing has been a feature of Bangladesh's security environment for some years. While often inconsistently applied in practice, it is integral to the work of the Bangladesh police. With the rise of new forms of violent extremism, questions are being asked about how this people-focused approach to crime prevention interacts with and can potentially complement more forceful approaches used to deal with violent extremists. Other countries dealing with extremist threats see a role for community policing in dealing with these new challenges. In Bangladesh, however, a gap remains in policy and practice between police working with local communities and law enforcement agencies addressing violent extremism.

A close examination of how community policing actually works in Bangladesh shows the potential for combining community policing and efforts to counter violent extremism, but the approach is experimental and evolving slowly. In contrast, the threat from violent extremism is moving quickly. Bangladesh police need to update their policies, strategies, and tactical documents. Community policing needs to be understood as an approach for the whole community, including youth and educational institutions, not only those who formally participate in designated Forums and events.

Fundamental to progress is a change in those mindsets that view communities as sources of intelligence for the police to one that views communities as active and trusted partners with whom to share information on goals and objectives. Those who take part in community policing activities need proper recognition of their contributions and protection from retaliation. To be effective, community policing needs to be less focused on ceremonial functions and more focused on results. The community police apparatus also needs to be better integrated with other security agencies that are more directly engaged with countering violent extremism.

Accomplishing all of this requires additional education and training for the Bangladesh police and their partners in communities, as well as the dedication of resources to facilitate progress and constant monitoring through rigorous research.

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# Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh: Surveying Support

*Ali Riaz and Syeda Salina Aziz*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# KEY FINDINGS

- Bangladeshis overwhelmingly support democratic principles and institutions, but do not view the current system of governance as living up to their expectations.
- Dissatisfaction with current democratic practices is driving citizens to search for alternatives, including Sharia, to promote good governance and prevent corruption.
- Minority populations are less likely to support Sharia, although a significant portion of minorities are willing to support certain aspects of it, including harsh physical punishments for crime.
- Support for democratic values in Bangladesh is higher among men, whereas support for Sharia is higher among rural communities and women.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although Bangladeshis support democracy, many also believe that introducing *Sharia*, or Islamic law based on the Qur'an and Hadith, might be helpful in ensuring justice and fairness in governance. They strongly endorse democratic values, including the importance of elected representation, an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and association, and the security of individual property rights. However, many are dissatisfied with the effectiveness and impartiality of the government. Many citizens do not feel they are fairly governed by elected representatives. They feel their rights are being impinged on and the judiciary is not free from political interference. While many citizens indicate they do not want to return to military rule. Nevertheless, most also supported granting the military control of the government during times of crisis when elected civilian leadership appears to be failing. Many see *Sharia* as one way to ensure better governance, to ensure fairer justice and to reduce corruption. There is widespread support for the implementation of facets of *Sharia* including harsh physical punishments and modest dress codes for women. Support among non-Muslim minorities for those facets of *Sharia* to be integrated into governance is lower but still significant.

This research brief is based on a face-to-face representative survey of 4,067 households in Bangladesh conducted in April 2017. Respondents indicated overwhelming support for key democratic principles, such as elected representatives, an independent judiciary, freedoms of speech and assembly, and property rights. However, the survey also reveals a perceived gap between the theory and practice of democracy in Bangladesh. There is disappointment in the ruling class and in governance failures. Large minorities feel that they are not governed fairly by elected representatives, that their freedoms of speech and assembly are increasingly restricted, and that the judiciary is subject to political interference. These findings are cause for concern among the country's democratic leaders. They demonstrate a lack of confidence in the way the current political system is operating and an ongoing search by citizens for alternatives.

For a country with a population that is more than 90 percent Muslim, it is not surprising that a vast majority of those surveyed supported some role for Islamic law in two regards: the way the country is governed, and the way the country's British colonial-era common law system is administered. There is a strong association between *Sharia* and good governance; more than 80 percent of respondents agreed with the statements that *Sharia* would ensure basic service provision, personal security, and justice, as well as discourage corruption. Respondents additionally expressed widespread support for whippings or cutting off of hands for theft and for stoning for adultery.

There are divergent views on democracy and *Sharia* among key demographics. Male respondents placed greater importance on democratic values. Support for *Sharia* was notably stronger in rural areas and among women. In the implementation of certain aspects of *Sharia* — with respect to wearing the veil, hijab, or niqab, in particular — women almost unanimously supported their right to make choices about what they wore; a significant minority of men disagreed. Support for democracy and elected leaders increased with greater educational attainment, and those with higher levels of education were less likely to support the harsh physical punishments associated with *Sharia*. Minorities were much less likely to support *Sharia* and a role for religious leaders in public life. However, significant sections of the non-Muslim community in Bangladesh were willing to support some of the aspects of *Sharia*, such as harsh punishments for violations of the law.

The survey results do not validate the common perception that support for democratic principles and practices is at odds with support for *Sharia*. Instead, the results suggest that support for both democratic principles and *Sharia* can be concurrent. In the context of the current political debates in Bangladesh, the survey shows that *Sharia* is regarded as a possible cure for some of the ailments that citizens see afflicting their democracy. Governance in Bangladesh is not living up to its citizens' democratic expectations. While this divergence deserves greater study, this survey demonstrates that citizens are beginning to look to alternative systems of governance to address what they perceive as poorly performing political representatives, judicial system corruption, and increasingly restricted fundamental rights.

# INTRODUCTION

Demands for implementing a salient role for Islamic ethos and practices in society and governance in Bangladesh are a part of the increasing political polarization that has persisted since its independence and accelerated in the past decade and a half.<sup>1</sup> After its founding, Bangladesh took a secular path and retained its British colonial-era common law-based judicial system. The country's 1972 constitution protects freedom of religion and prohibits the imposition of one religion on the adherents of another.<sup>2</sup> Today, amid growing debate about the role of Islam in the country, Islamist groups, including extremist groups, are openly advocating for the implementation of *Sharia* law.<sup>3</sup> It is important to recognize that *Sharia* has different political and cultural interpretations. For some, it is a set of harsh punitive measures to enforce compliance with religious codes, often in contradiction to secular laws. For others, the meaning is contextual and has been interpreted as a means of ensuring “good” governance and/or as an antidote to corruption. Given this debate, an important question to consider in Bangladesh is what relationship, if any, exists between support for democracy and support for *Sharia*.

Democracy remains one of the most used and contested terms in political science. There is no universally accepted definition of the concept. This briefing paper adopts a minimalist definition that perceives democracy as a system of governance with three attributes:

- Universal suffrage;
- Regular, free, competitive, multi-party elections for legislative and chief executive offices; and
- Respect for civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association and rule of law.<sup>4</sup>

*Sharia* is understood as a term that incorporates a range of codified and uncoded practices relating to governance, social behavior, and personal life, in accordance with the divine precepts of the Qur'an and the Hadith. *Sharia*, itself, remains open to interpretation.

Surveys and opinion polls have consistently indicated popular support for democracy in Bangladesh. The 1996 World Values Survey recorded unequivocal support for democracy following the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the country's first inclusive free and fair general election, which occurred after a popular uprising. Nearly 98 percent of respondents stated that they thought a democratic political system was a very good or a fairly good idea.<sup>5</sup> The 2002 World Values Survey revealed similar results in terms of

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1 Matthew Nelson and Seth Oldmixon, “Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence,” RESOLVE Network *Bangladesh Research Report* No.1, September 2017.

2 See Articles 28 and 41, Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, November 4, 1972.

3 Haroon Habib, “The 13-Point Demands,” *The Hindu*, April 7, 2013.

4 Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 110-11.

5 World Values Survey, 1996, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV3.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV3.jsp).

respondents' opinions of democratic systems.<sup>6</sup> Several other opinion polls conducted in the following years have documented persistent and strong endorsements of democracy among Bangladeshis.<sup>7</sup> However, these surveys also revealed that a majority of the population has difficulty understanding the essential features of democratic systems. Events in Bangladesh in the past decade have similarly demonstrated the presence of a shallow democratic culture and weak democratic institutions and practices. After an impasse resulting in widespread violence in late 2006, scheduled general elections were cancelled, and a military-backed technocratic government was installed and remained in power for two years. In a similar incident, the addition of a 15<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment in 2011, which, among other changes, removed the provision for a nonpartisan caretaker government during election campaigns, resulted in a boycott of national polls by major opposition parties in 2014.<sup>8</sup>

Surveys and polls in Bangladesh have documented growing support for a greater role for religion in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> The 1996 and 2002 World Values Surveys recorded that 83 and 88 percent of respondents, respectively, greatly valued the role of religion in their lives. In the 2002 survey, 59 percent strongly agreed, and 35 percent agreed that the protection of religion was one of top priorities of government. The respondents viewed strong religious affiliation as one of the key determinants of how fit politicians are for public office. This shift coincided with changes in political and social landscapes, the deletion of secularism as a state principle from the constitution in 1978, and its reinstatement in 2011. In 1979, religion-based political parties were allowed to form and began demanding the adoption of *Sharia* law. In 1988, the constitution was amended by then-President Hussain Muhammad Ershad, establishing Islam as the state religion but making no reference to *Sharia*. Islamist parties emerged as key powerbrokers in the struggle between the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for control of the government. The use of religious symbols and icons in political discourse also rose during that time.<sup>10</sup> The trend of an increasing presence for religion in the public sphere continues today; recent survey data show that Bangladeshis strongly support the replacement of their common law-based legal system with one founded on *Sharia*.<sup>11</sup>

To date, no publicly available, detailed studies have been conducted to gauge popular perceptions of the essential features of democracy in the country. This research brief addresses the largely unexplored link between *Sharia* and democracy. Its primary focus is to use new RESOLVE Network survey data to analyze popular perceptions of democracy and to understand how proponents of democracy perceive *Sharia*. It

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6 World Values Survey, 2002, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV4.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV4.jsp).

7 See “The Daily Star-Nielsen Election Opinion Poll 2008,” *The Daily Star*, November 21, 2008; Syeda Salina Aziz and Elvira Graner, *Governance Barometer Survey Bangladesh 2010*, (Dhaka: Institute of Governance Studies, BRAC University).

8 Ali Riaz, “A Crisis of Democracy in Bangladesh,” *Current History* 113, Issue 762: 150-56.

9 Ali Riaz, “Religion in Public Life in Bangladesh,” Keynote address at the Drivers of Violence and Conflict in Bangladesh: Evidence-Based Research and Understanding Roundtable, sponsored by the RESOLVE Network (Washington, DC) and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD, Bangladesh), Dhaka, April 4, 2017.

10 Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*, (Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); and Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

11 C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller. 2017. “Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?” *Politics and Religion*: 1-40, doi:10.1017/S1755048317000347 1755-0483/17.

also explores whether demographic variables, particularly educational attainment, have any effects on citizens' views. Given that Muslims constitute over 90 percent of the population, the survey also recorded the responses of non-Muslims. The sample was broadly representative of the Bangladeshi community; 85 percent of respondents claimed to be followers of the Islamic faith.<sup>12</sup>

The survey measured the popular understanding of democracy by gauging perceptions of core democratic values, such as judicial independence, elected representation, freedoms of speech and association, and property rights. Views on *Sharia* were measured by gauging respondents' understanding of Islamic laws and how they perceived *Sharia*'s impact on governance, public services, personal security, and the administration of justice. The survey also explored respondents' attitudes on the punitive dimensions of *Sharia*, such as whipping, chopping off of hands, and stoning. Finally, the survey examined general support and opinions among Bangladeshis regarding the implementation of a *Sharia*-based legal system.

Specifically, this research brief addresses the following research questions:

- Are people supportive of democratic values in Bangladesh? If so, to what extent?
- What are the perceptions of democratic practices in the country?
- What is the general perception of a government under *Sharia* law? To what extent do people see *Sharia* as a key component in ensuring better governance? To what extent do people view *Sharia* as a punitive system?
- Do people who support democratic values believe that *Sharia* can ensure better governance in Bangladesh?
- Does educational attainment make any difference in an individual's opinion of *Sharia*?

Responses to these questions can help to advance the understanding of the depth of support for democracy among Bangladeshis, the values they attach to democracy, their perception of the current state of governance, and whether they view *Sharia* as an alternative to the common law legal system.<sup>13</sup>

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12 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "National Report Volume 1: Analytical Report," Bangladesh Population and Housing Census (Dhaka, 2011), 86.

13 This research brief takes a narrow slice of a large dataset from the national survey described to look at these specific issues. Additional RESOLVE Network researchers utilized data from this survey to examine different phenomena in a separate RESOLVE Network Research Brief: C. Christine Fair and Wahid Abdallah, "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: Public Awareness and Attitudes," RESOLVE Network *Bangladesh Research Brief* No.4, September 2017.



# METHODOLOGY

This research brief uses data from a face-to-face nationally representative survey of 4,067 households in Bangladesh conducted from April 12-30, 2017. During this period, there were no major domestic political events or extremist acts of violence that might have had a significant impact on respondents' attitudes. Still, several anti-militant raids were conducted by security forces during the survey period, inducing fear among citizens in some areas of the country. Due to the sensitivity generated by these events, approximately five percent of respondents asked to stop the survey when questions about religion and militancy were posed.

The survey followed a stratified random sampling design; the samples were nationally representative at division levels and maintain a ratio of 50/50 male/female and 75/25 rural/urban, following the Population Census of 2011. The division level samples were assigned following the proportionate distribution of the population of the census, including for religion. Analytical weights were used to obtain all the estimates. The overall response rate was 70 percent. Similar surveys in Bangladesh record a response rate of around 75 percent. As noted below, on some questions on religious subjects, the non-response rate for non-Muslims was around 13 percent.

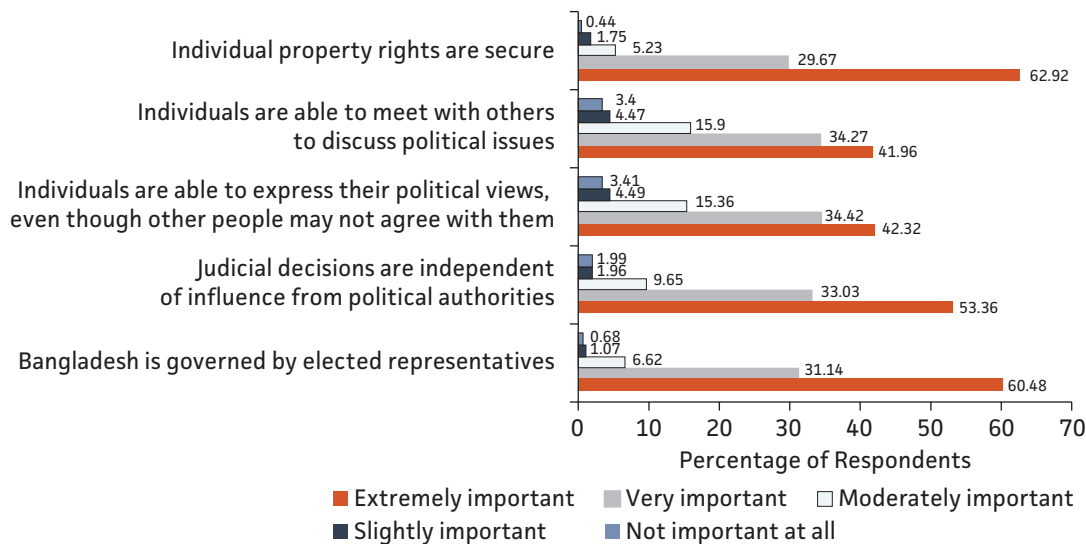
The survey size was originally planned to be 8,000 respondents. However, data collection was stopped just over halfway through fieldwork following a request from local authorities to excise some of the survey's key questions. Rather than compromise the survey, data collection was halted. The decision to halt the survey did not damage the survey's validity. When the survey was halted the sample distribution was already sourced evenly across the country and representative in terms of administrative divisions, gender, religion, and urban/rural dwellers. To continue with a revised questionnaire would, in effect, have meant conducting a second parallel, but incomparable, survey. This second survey would have contributed to neither a greater level of understanding of the issues nor a higher level of statistical accuracy in the results. The original margin of error for the sample size of 8,000 was approximately 1.10 percent at a 5 percent level of significance. With the reduced sample, the margin of error in the final dataset increased to 1.54 percent at a 5 percent level of significance.

# PERCEPTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

## Strong Support for Democratic Principles

There is overwhelming support for the four core principles of democracy among Bangladeshis (Figure 1). The survey used the operational definition of democracy referenced previously to measure four key attributes — property rights, elected representation, independent judiciary, and freedoms of expression and association — as indicators of democracy.

**Figure 1** Support for core democratic principles



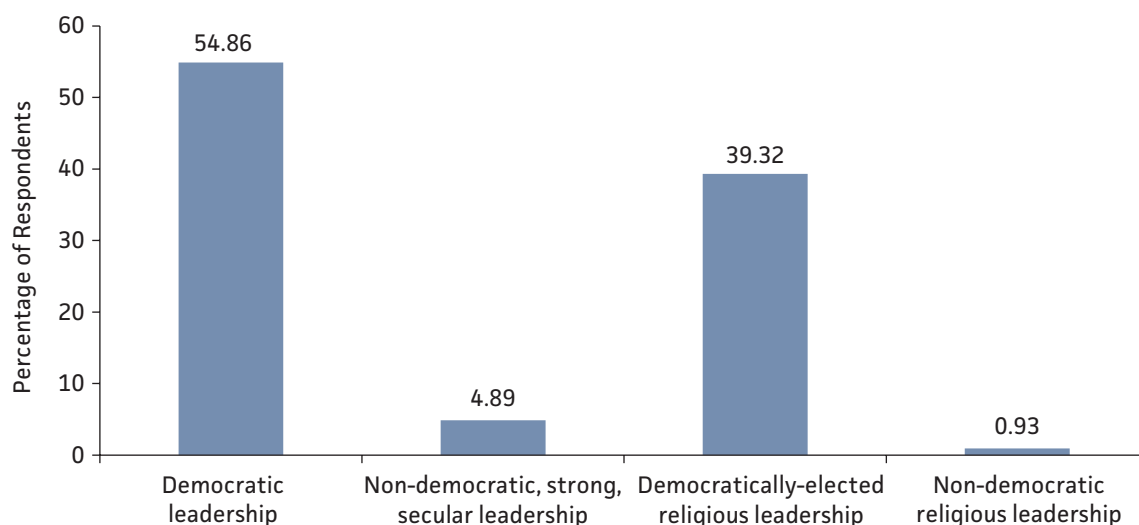
Respondents expressed the highest support for the security of individual property rights; approximately 92 percent agreed that individual property rights were either extremely important (63 percent) or very important for them (30 percent). An overwhelming 91 percent thought elected representation was a core democratic principle; more than 61 percent cited this attribute as extremely important, and 31 percent cited it as very important. When asked about the importance of the judiciary’s ability to issue judgments independent of political influence, approximately 86 percent replied that it is either extremely important or very important. Among the attributes of democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of association were ranked lowest, at 76 percent and 75 percent, respectively. The survey revealed no pronounced rural/urban variation with respect to these questions; however, male respondents were found to put greater importance on democratic values.

### *Preference for Elected Leadership*

Respondents indicated a strong preference for elected leaders. The questionnaire was designed to understand Bangladeshis’ preferred form of leadership and the type of leaders they considered to be best positioned to establish order and stability in the country. In response to a question about their leadership preferences, 55 percent expressed a strong preference for democratic, secular leadership; 39 percent voiced support

for a democratically elected religious leader. Only a small minority preferred non-democratic leadership, whether secular or religious (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Preference for leadership



#### *Views on Military versus Civilian Rule*

Bangladesh was ruled by military and pseudo-military regimes between 1975 and 1990. During this period, the country was rocked by several successful and abortive coups d'état. In the wake of the political impasse in 2006, the military intervened in the political process and remained actively engaged until an elected civilian government was installed after a fair election in December 2008.

This experience raises the question of how Bangladeshis perceive the military's role and its relationship with elected civilian leadership. In total, 72 percent of respondents said that they supported either complete or significant civilian control over the military. More specifically, 51 percent of respondents insisted that elected civilian leadership should have complete control over the military, as stipulated in the country's constitution.<sup>14</sup> Another 21 percent of respondents said that they supported elected civilian leadership's significant, but not necessarily complete, control over the military. It is noteworthy, however, that 83 percent of the respondents said they would support the military's assumption of control in times of emergency, such as when corruption leads to a failure in civilian leadership or its inability to govern. No significant variations in responses to these questions were recorded among rural and urban respondents or among men and women.

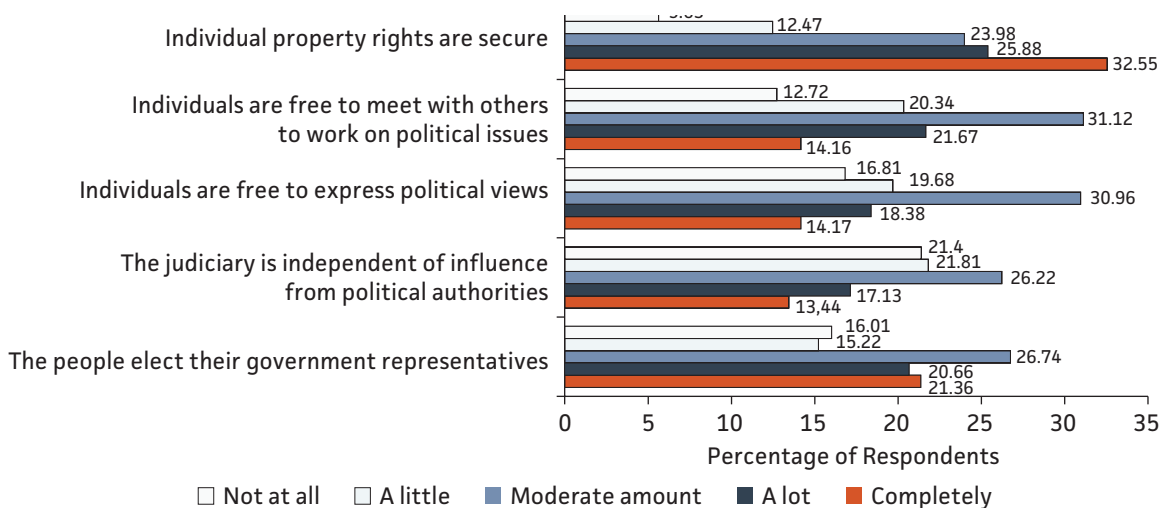
#### *Perceived Gap between Democratic Ideals and Practice*

A gap exists between what Bangladeshis expect from democracy and how they experience it in practice. Public perceptions about existing democratic practices were measured using a set of five indicators on property rights, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, judicial independence, and elected representation (Figure 3). More than 36 percent of the respondents stated that individuals have limited

<sup>14</sup> Article 61, The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

freedom in their expression of political views or their political activities. The result is comparable to the findings of two other opinion polls conducted in 2015 and 2016; both revealed that 38 percent of those surveyed did not feel free to express their political opinions.<sup>15</sup> About 43 percent of the respondents felt that political authorities have influence over the judicial system, compromising its autonomy. However, 56 percent believed that individual property rights were secure.

**Figure 3** Democracy: Perceptions and practice

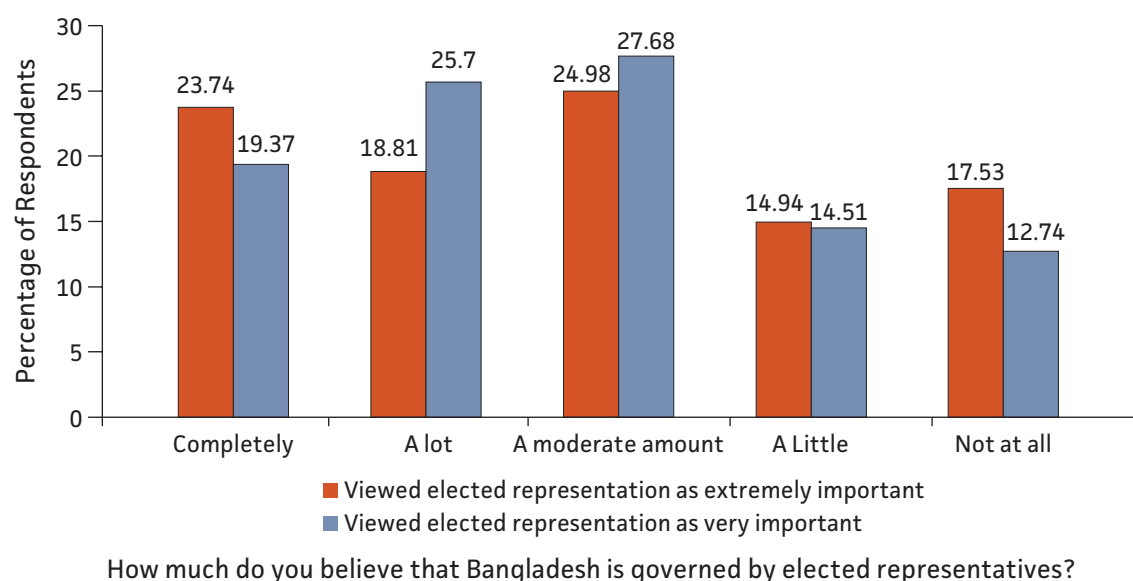


#### *Doubts about Elected Representatives and Judicial Independence*

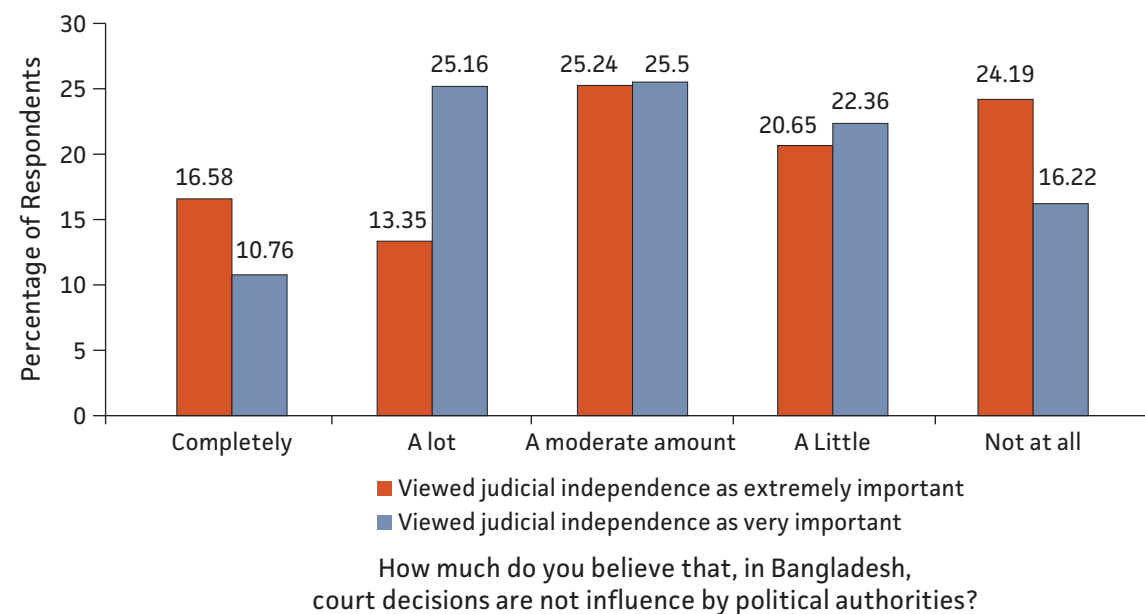
There is a striking disparity between what the respondents hold to be accepted democratic norms and what they view as the existing practices of these institutions. Nearly one-third of the respondents who valued living in a democratically governed country believed the country is not actually governed by those they elected (Figure 4). Approximately 43 percent of those who viewed judicial independence from political authorities to be extremely important or very important thought judges enjoy no or very little freedom from political influence (Figure 5). The respondents who placed extreme importance on elected representation and judicial independence as attributes of democracy expressed comparatively more dissatisfaction with the actual state of the country's democracy.

<sup>15</sup> Democracy International, "Democracy International Releases Latest Survey Data on Bangladesh at Wilson Center," press release, December 8, 2016; The Asia Foundation, "Bangladesh's Democracy: According to its People," public opinion survey, March 25, 2016.

**Figure 4** Assessment of Bangladesh's democracy in terms of elected representation



**Figure 5** Assessment of Bangladesh's democracy in terms of judicial independence

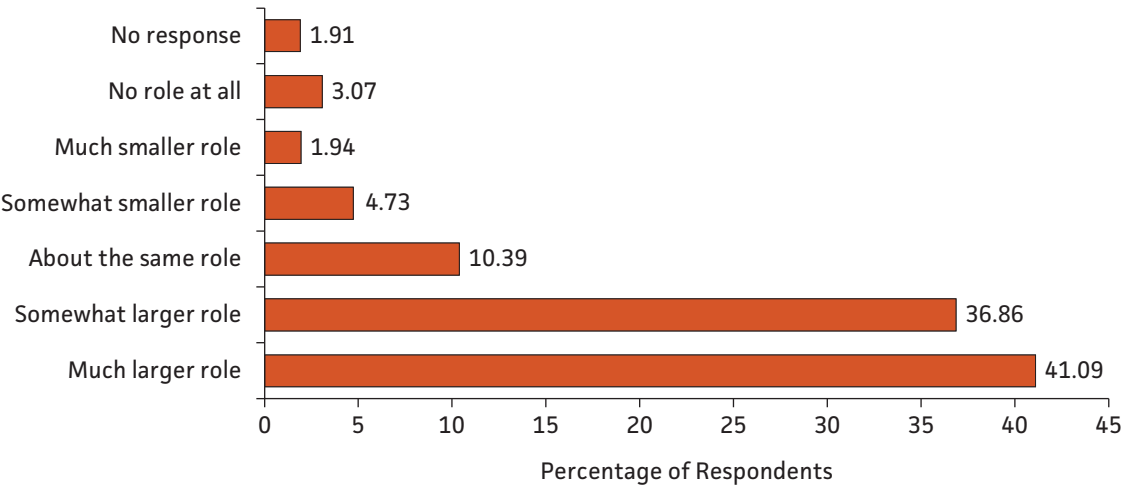


# PERCEPTIONS OF *SHARIA*

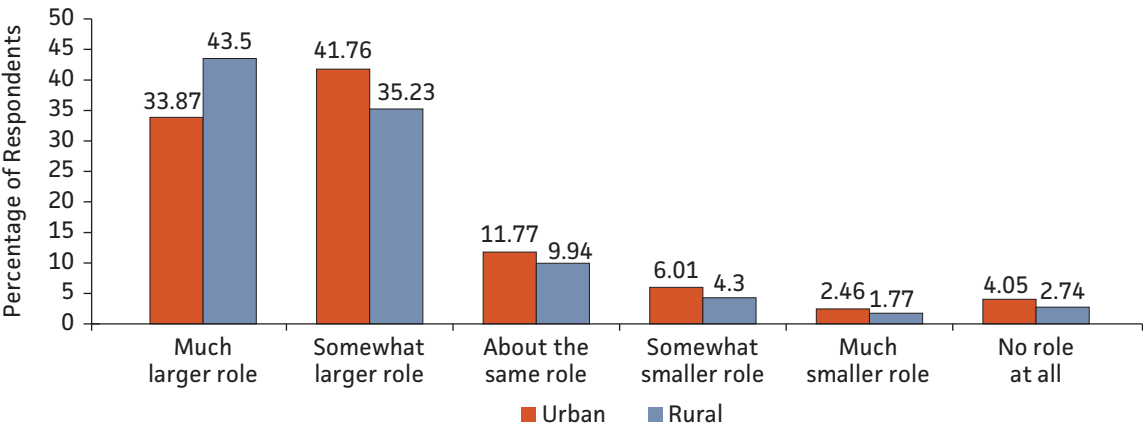
## Support for a legal system based on *Sharia*

The respondents expressed overwhelming support for a greater role for *Sharia* in the legal system of Bangladesh. Just over 77 percent agreed there should be a much larger role or a somewhat larger role for *Sharia* (Figure 6). This support is consistent among urban and rural respondents (Figure 7); it does not vary greatly between men and women (Figure 8).

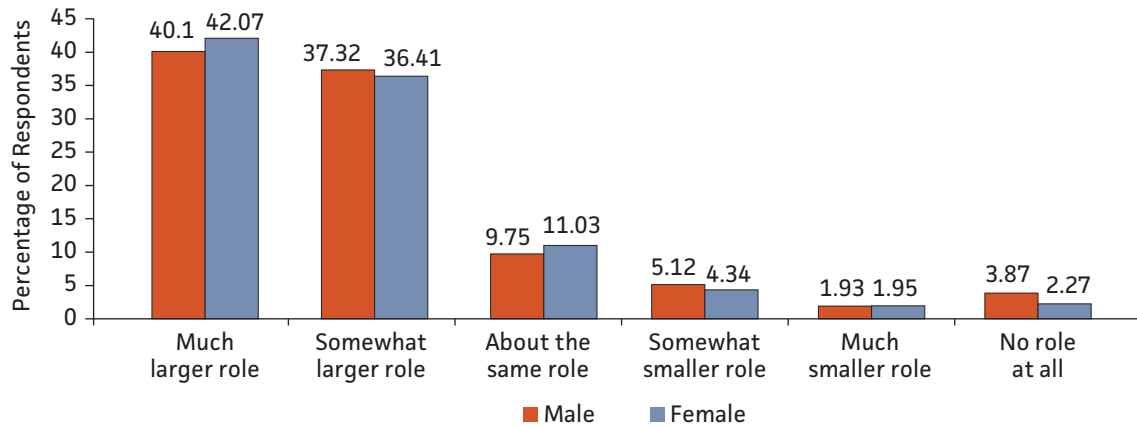
**Figure 6** Support for a larger role for *Sharia* in the legal system



**Figure 7** Location disaggregated support for *Sharia*



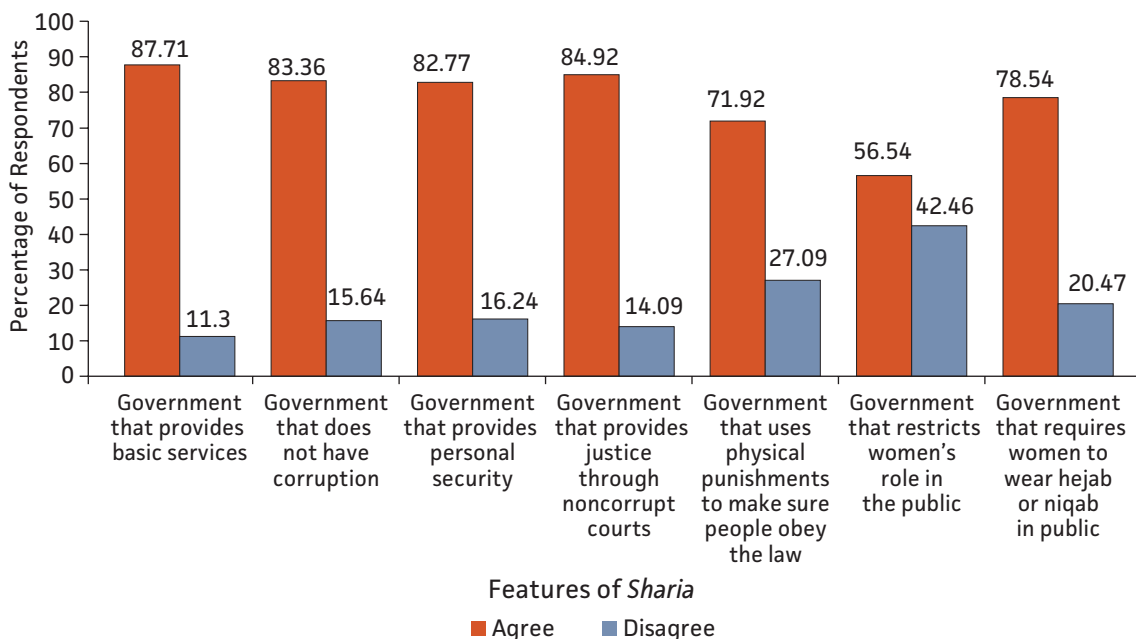
**Figure 8** Gender disaggregated support for *Sharia*



#### *Perceived Association between Sharia and Good Governance*

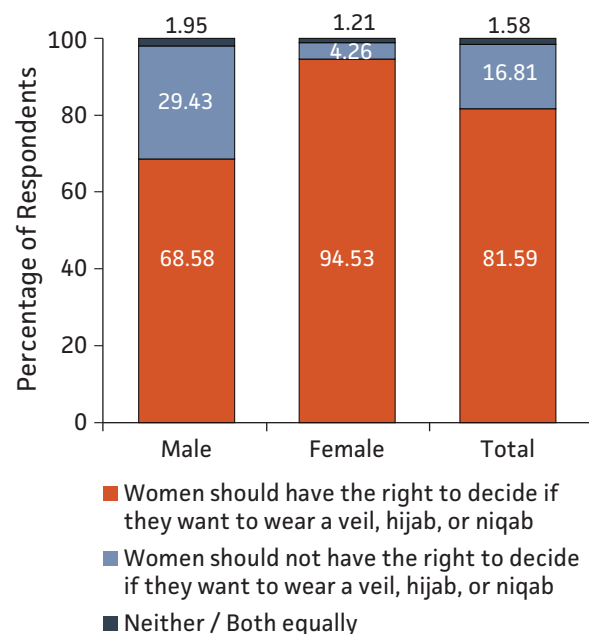
The survey revealed a positive association between *Sharia* and good governance (Figure 9). On average, more than 80 percent of respondents agreed with the statements that *Sharia* would ensure basic service provision, personal security, and justice as well as discourage corruption. A majority also stated that strict punitive action, such as harsh physical punishment, is a key feature of *Sharia*. On average, 70 percent of the respondents believed that *Sharia* uses harsh punishments to ensure obedience to the law. About 78 percent believed that *Sharia* would make it mandatory for women to wear a veil, hijab, or niqab. However, 46 percent disagreed with the statement that this requirement would limit the role of women in public. There was consensus, especially among the female respondents, that women should be the ultimate decision-makers in terms of whether to wear a head covering in public (Figure 10).

**Figure 9** Features of *Sharia*





**Figure 10** Support for women's right to choose to wear the veil



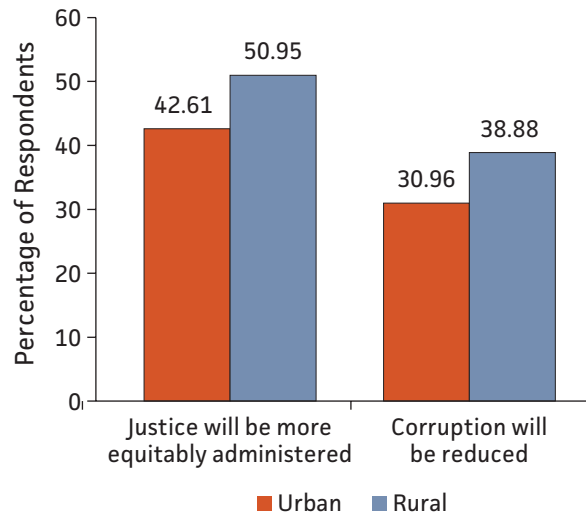
#### *Perception of Sharia as a Positive Influence to Improve Justice and Reduce Corruption*

A legal system based on *Sharia* was perceived to have some positive influences on public officials. Nearly 83 percent of the respondents thought *Sharia* law would help ensure justice. If *Sharia* is given a larger role in Bangladesh, 69 percent of the respondents thought it would help reduce corruption. Nearly 52 percent believed that *Sharia* would initiate greater physical punishment to ensure obedience of the law. Nearly 81 percent said its introduction would give religious leaders greater influence in the legal system (Table 1). Urban-rural disaggregation shows that *Sharia* is regarded more positively among rural respondents than their urban counterparts (Figure 11).

**Table 1** *Sharia's* perceived role in Bangladesh

	Would ensure fairer justice	Reduce corruption	Introduce physical punishment	Increase the influence of religious leaders in the legal system
Certain	49%	37 %	20%	41 %
Very likely	34 %	32 %	32%	40 %
Somewhat likely	8 %	8 %	28 %	11 %
Not very likely	5 %	12%	12 %	5 %
Not at all likely	3 %	9 %	7 %	2%

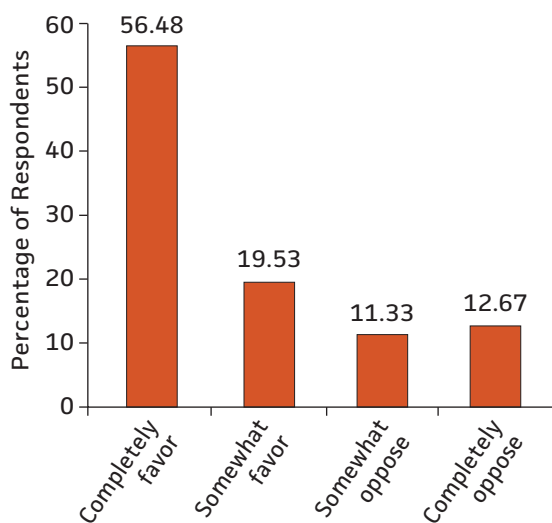
**Figure 11** Urban/rural disaggregated responses regarding the perceived role of *Sharia*



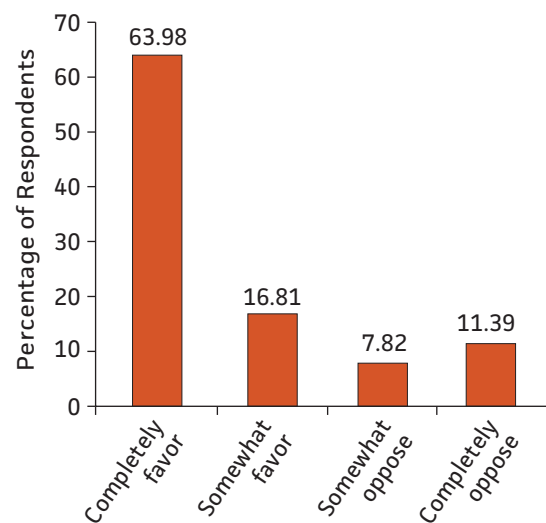
#### *Support for Harsh Physical Punishments*

The respondents expressed considerable support for the use of harsh physical punishments as part of *Sharia*.<sup>16</sup> More than half believed that the introduction of *Sharia* would result in a harsher system of punishments. When asked whether they supported punishments like “whipping and cutting off of hands for crimes like theft and robbery,” more than 50 percent said they completely supported such punishments; approximately 13 percent opposed them (Figure 12). More than 60 percent completely favored stoning as the punishment for adultery, and around 20 percent opposed it (Figure 13).

**Figure 12** Support for whipping and cutting off of hands as punishments for theft



**Figure 13** Support for stoning as punishments for adultery

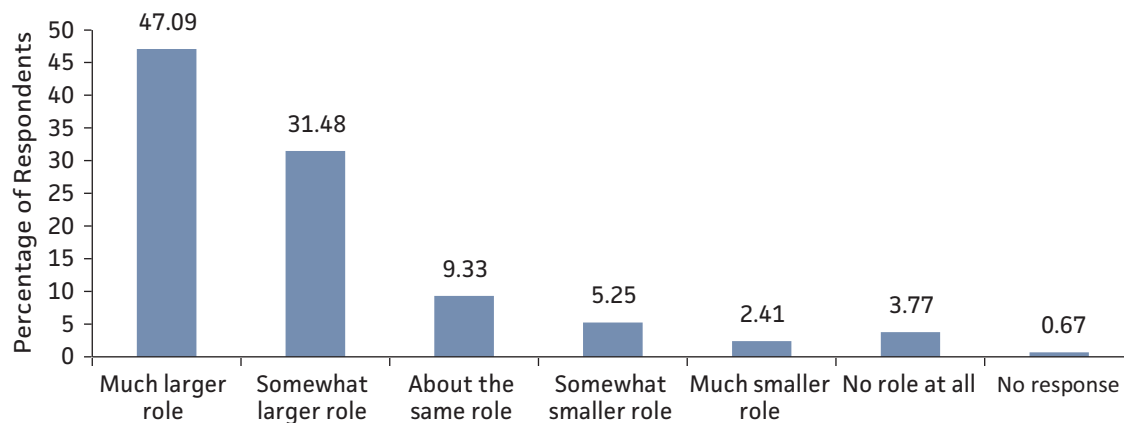


16 Additional findings on Bangladeshis’ support for *Sharia* can be found in: C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller, “Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?,” 1-40.

# DEMOCRACY AND *SHARIA*

Strong democratic principles constitute one of the key aspects of the mindset of the people of Bangladesh. Respondents highly valued the security of individual property rights, elected representation, and judicial independence. These attitudes coexist with overwhelming support for a greater role for *Sharia* and religious leaders in the legal system and for harsher punishments. Do those who are more supportive of democratic values also back a larger role for *Sharia*? If so, how do they see these democratic values interacting with their belief in Islamic law? This survey showed that most of those who support democracy also support *Sharia*. Nearly 78 percent of the respondents expressed support for a greater role of *Sharia* in the common law legal system (Figure 14).

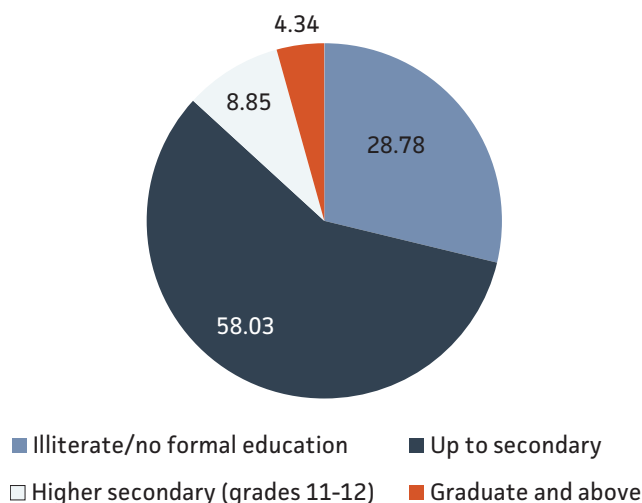
**Figure 14** Attitudes of democracy supporters toward an increased role for *Sharia*



Respondents who were more supportive of democratic values also favored harsh physical punishments. Around 73 percent were completely or somewhat in favor of whippings or cutting off of hands as punishments for theft; 81 percent supported stoning as punishment for adultery. The perception of *Sharia*'s role in Bangladesh among supporters of democracy is similar to the general perception, as revealed in the earlier section of the survey. They believe that a larger role for *Sharia* would result in more equitable administration of justice (83 percent), reduce corruption (70 percent), introduce harsher physical punishments (50 percent), and increase the influence of religious leaders in the legal system (80 percent). The survey data did not validate the common perception that support for democratic principles and practices stands in contrast to support for *Sharia*. Instead, the results suggest that support for both can be concurrent. Most respondents prefer a *Sharia*-based legal system and a larger role for religion in the justice system.

These results warrant further exploration of the profile of the respondents and whether any variation exists among them based on their demographics. Seventy-five percent of the sample was drawn from rural areas and 25 percent was drawn from urban areas. The mean age of respondents was thirty-eight years; around 40 percent was younger than thirty years. Of the respondents, 29 percent had no education, and 58 percent had education up to the secondary level (ten years of schooling). Only 9 percent had education beyond the secondary level (twelve years of schooling); 4 percent held a graduate level qualification (Figure 15).

**Figure 15** Educational profile of respondents



Studies have shown that socio-demographic variables can be important determinants of support for religious extremism. One analysis using 2002 Pew data showed that support for terrorism is highest among the urban poor.<sup>17</sup> In Pakistan, a contrasting study found that the urban poor are more likely to oppose the role of militants than those in middle-income groups.<sup>18</sup> In terms of the relationship between education and extremism, some have argued that support for suicide bombing decreases with higher educational attainment.<sup>19</sup> Higher educational levels have also been thought to reduce outright support for violence.<sup>20</sup>

This survey explored the association between general or non-religious education, on the one hand, and support for democracy, religious leaders' involvement in government, and harsh physical punishment, on the other hand. Findings indicate that general education is negatively associated with support for an increasing role for religious leaders in political governance. As the level of educational attainment rises, support for democratic leadership increases and support for religious leaders' involvement in the political process decreases. The results suggest that the level of education and perceptions regarding punishment are inversely correlated; respondents with higher levels of education are less supportive of harsh physical punishments (Figures 16 and 17). No such pattern was found based on urban versus rural places of residence.

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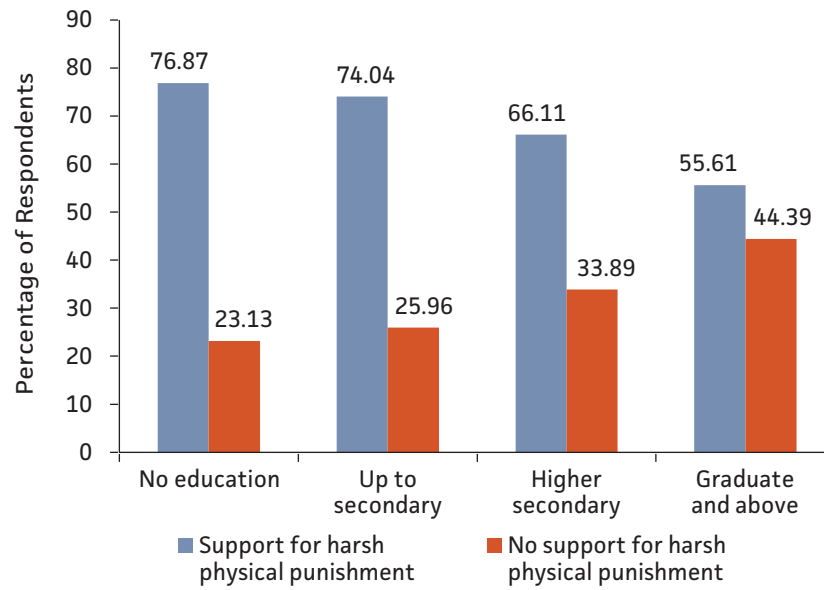
17 Michael Mousseau, "Urban Poverty and Support for Islamist Terror: Survey Results of Muslims in Fourteen Countries," *Journal of Peace Research* 48 (2011): 35–47.

18 Graeme Blair, C. Christine Fair, Neil Malhotra, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan," *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (2013): 30–48.

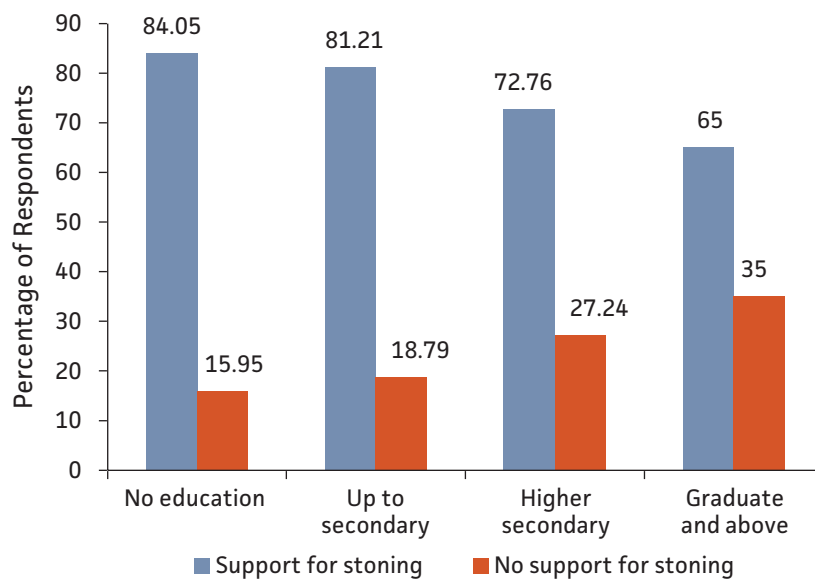
19 M. Najeeb Shafiq and Abdulkader H. Sinno, "Education, Income and Support for Suicide Bombings: Evidence from Six Muslim Countries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 (2010): 146–78.

20 C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller, "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?" 1–40.

**Figure 16** Support for harsh physical punishment, by educational level



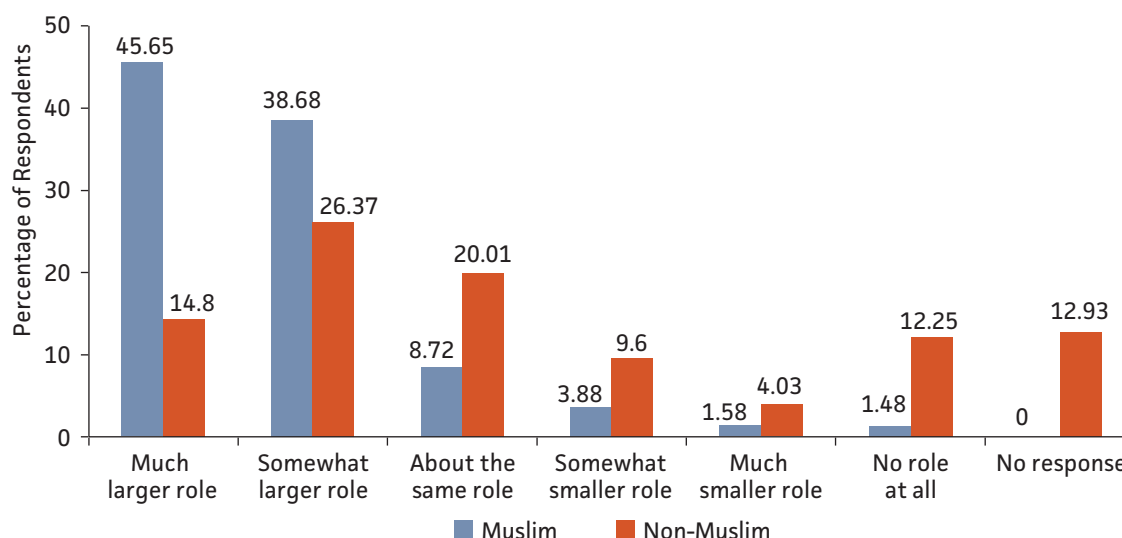
**Figure 17** Support for stoning, by educational level



# VIEWS OF NON-MUSLIMS ON *SHARIA*

Not surprisingly, the survey results showed Muslims have more positive views about *Sharia* than members of other minority faiths. However, non-Muslims expressed support for some aspects of a legal system influenced by *Sharia* (Figure 18). Disaggregation of the survey results by religion showed that nearly 46 percent of Muslim respondents supported a much larger role, and 39 percent preferred a somewhat larger role. Among non-Muslim respondents, only 15 percent supported a much larger role and 26 percent supported a somewhat larger role for *Sharia*. The response rate for Muslims was 100 percent; around 13 percent of non-Muslims choose not to respond to this question.

**Figure 18** Support for *Sharia* as a form of governance, by religion



## *Justice, Corruption, and Harsh Punishments*

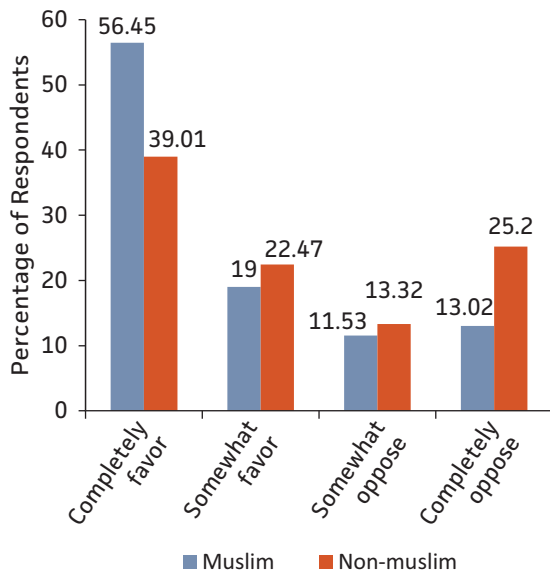
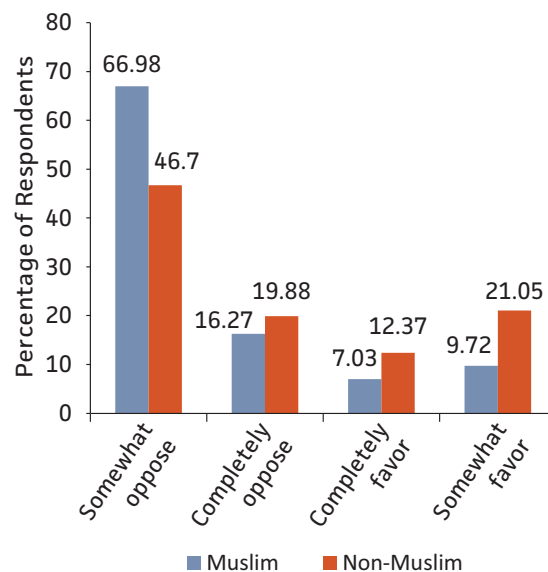
Muslim respondents are more positive or express greater certainty about the possible positive impact of *Sharia* on governance and the legal system. An overwhelming number of Muslim respondents (88 percent) believed that introducing *Sharia* into the legal system would make the administration of justice more equitable, but 55 percent of non-Muslim respondents shared this optimism (Table 2). Around 73 percent of the Muslim respondents believed that corruption would be reduced in a *Sharia*-based legal system; 43 percent of non-Muslims agreed. Nevertheless, the percentage of disagreement with these statements was quite high among non-Muslims respondents; 16 percent said that the administration of justice would be less equitable, and 27 percent said that corruption would increase. Around 54 percent of Muslims and 34 percent of non-Muslims thought that if *Sharia* was adopted, harsh physical punishments would be introduced. As with the previous question, the response rate for Muslims was 100 percent; around 13 percent of non-Muslims chose not to respond.

**Table 2** Perceived role of *Sharia* in Bangladesh, by religion

	Justice will be more equitably administered		Corruption will be reduced		Physical punishments will be introduced	
	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Muslim	Non-Muslim
Certain	53.3%	23.6%	40.7%	14.9%	21.3%	53.3%
Very likely	34.4%	32.0%	32.3%	28.5%	32.9%	34.4%
Somewhat likely	6.5%	16.1%	6.0%	17.4%	28.6%	6.5%
Not very likely	3.8%	10.5%	11.6%	17.2%	11.6%	3.8%
Not at all/ Completely disagree	2.1%	5.1%	9.4%	9.4%	5.7%	2.1%
No response	0.0%	12.8%	0.0%	12.6%	0.0%	0.0%

### *Support for Harsh Physical Punishments*

Muslim respondents were more supportive of punitive measures than non-Muslims. Around 56 percent of Muslim respondents supported physical punishments for theft and robbery; 13 percent was completely against it. Among non-Muslims, there was some support for physical punishments. Around 39 percent of non-Muslim respondents supported a system of harsh punishments for theft, compared to 25 percent who completely opposed it. Similar responses were recorded regarding the attitude of non-Muslim respondents toward stoning for adultery. Nearly 67 percent of Muslim respondents supported stoning, and only 10 percent opposed it; among the non-Muslims, 47 percent supported stoning, and 21 percent opposed it.

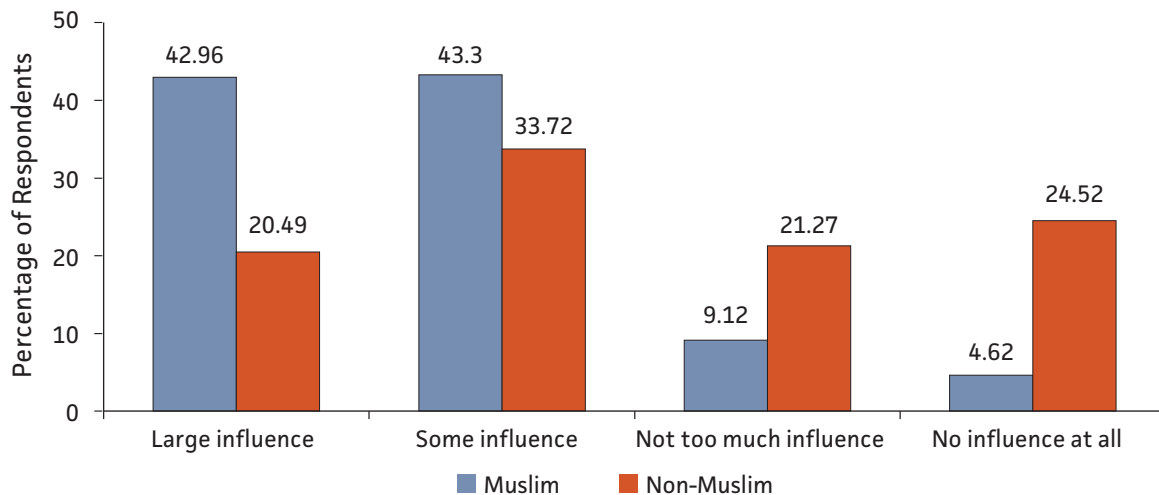
**Figure 19** Support for whipping or cutting off of hands, by religion**Figure 20** Support for stoning for adultery, by religion



### *Support for Increased Role for Religious Leaders in Governance Process*

Support for the involvement of religious leaders in the political process was noticeably lower among non-Muslims (Figure 21). Around 93 percent of Muslim respondents expressed their support for the idea that religious leaders should have a large degree or at least some influence in the governance process, but only 54 percent of non-Muslims agreed. Around 21 percent of non-Muslim respondents preferred that religious leaders have only have limited influence; 25 percent stated that religious leaders should have no influence on the governance process.

**Figure 21** Support for the involvement of religious leaders in the governance process



# CONCLUSIONS

Two points clearly emerged from the survey data analyzed for this research brief. First, Bangladeshis unequivocally support for democratic values; second, support for *Sharia* as a mode of good governance and as a guiding principle for the legal system is significantly high. The latter finding is hardly acknowledged in discussions on Bangladesh. Weak democratic institutions, particularly the perceived lack of judicial independence, appear to be providing opportunities for advocates to demand a greater role for *Sharia* in the country's legal system.

Although the survey often found remarkable uniformity across the demographics of respondents, a few variations are worth noting. Support for an increased role for *Sharia* was distinctly stronger in rural versus urban areas, and there was slightly more support among women than men. In the implementation of certain aspects of *Sharia* — in particular, the wearing of the veil, hijab, or niqab — women almost unanimously supported their decision to make the choices about what they wore; a significant minority of men disagreed. Support for democracy and elected leaders increased with greater educational attainment, and those with higher levels of education were less likely to support harsh physical punishments associated with *Sharia*. Minorities were significantly less likely to support *Sharia* and roles for religious leaders in public life, but significant sections of non-Muslim respondents supported some aspects associated with it, such as harsh punishments.

The discrepancy between the popular perception of the attributes of democracy and the actual state of democracy in Bangladesh, as revealed by this survey, are a source of concern. Elected representatives and an independent judiciary were regarded as important institutions by those who participated in this survey; however, large numbers of respondents believed these two crucial elements of democracy were not functioning well in Bangladesh. This gap between the theory and practice of democracy is encouraging citizens to look for alternatives to promote good governance, prevent corruption, and limit partisanship. Moving forward, the interplay between these two factors merits further study.

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# **Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh**

## **Public Awareness and Attitudes**

*C. Christine Fair and Wahid Abdallah*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This research brief was written by C. Christine Fair, a Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor in the Security Studies Program, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, and Wahid Abdallah, a RESOLVE Network Fellow and Research Fellow at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, BRAC University, Dhaka. Dr. Fair and Ali Riaz, Professor in the Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University, served as co-principal investigators for the RESOLVE Network survey that created the dataset used in this research brief.

# KEY FINDINGS

- While overall support in Bangladesh for violent extremist groups and their violent tactics is low, a surprising number of well-to-do and well-educated Bangladeshis indicate support.
- Among those who indicated support for violent extremist tactics in a countrywide survey, women indicated greater support than men.
- A significant number of citizens claimed not to be aware of violent extremist attacks, potentially indicating widespread uneasiness with openly discussing politically sensitive issues amid indications that many Bangladeshis feel freedom of expression is constrained.
- Shrinking space for open public discourse about the challenge of violent extremism could raise significant barriers to the government's ability to neutralize and mitigate extremist threats.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overall support for violent extremist groups or their violent tactics is low in Bangladesh. However, contrary to popular theories about causal links between poverty and support for violent extremism, where support is found it is not only among the uneducated poor, but also among the more well-to-do. In a recent survey testing support for the goals and tactics of three leading extremist groups, a surprising number of the more educated and wealthier citizens in Bangladesh indicated support for militant groups, including the local offshoots of Islamic State (Da'esh)<sup>1</sup> or Al-Qaeda. Perhaps more significantly, many survey respondents also claimed not to recall high-profile militant attacks, signaling a widespread uneasiness with speaking openly about violent extremism. This uneasiness could have adverse implications for not only for public support of government efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, but the effectiveness of current interventions as well.

As part of a nationwide RESOLVE Network survey of 4,067 respondents in April 2017, Bangladeshis were asked about three high-profile events of domestic extremist violence in the past twelve years. The first was in August 2005, when hundreds of small bombs were simultaneously detonated in sixty-three out of sixty-four districts by the Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). The second was the October 2015 assassination of a well-known publisher of atheist publications by members of the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), an affiliate of Al-Qaeda. The third drew global headlines in July 2016 when the Holey Artisan Bakery was besieged by local militants, who killed twenty hostages and dedicated their action to Da'esh. Those taking the survey were asked about their awareness of the events themselves, whether

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<sup>1</sup> Da'esh is an Arabic translation of the acronym for the Islamic State in the Levant, also known as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). The RESOLVE Network refers to ISIS by this Arabic acronym.

they supported the violent tactics, and their support for the militants' stated goals for the attacks, which included promoting *Sharia* or assassinating the distributor of materials judged to be an affront to Islam.

Although overall support for the specific tactics used by the three militant groups in the survey was small, terrorism is a low numbers game; support need not be high for militant groups to gain adherents. The goal of two of the three militant groups tested in this survey was to use violent tactics to implement *Sharia*, domestically or globally. Not all of those surveyed were aware of the three attacks, but among those who recalled them were significant minorities who supported the attackers' goals. Respondents were less likely to support using violent means to achieve these ends, but among those who did, more women supported violence as a tactic than men. Higher-income groups expressed greater support for militant groups, and better-educated Bangladeshis were more likely to support the ABT's assassination of a well-known publisher than other demographics. There was some slight preference among rural respondents for the goals of Da'esh to globally implement *Sharia*, but no significant variation in support for violent attacks was noted between urban and rural dwellers.

The relatively high level of respondents expressing no knowledge of these three prominent attacks is concerning. It could reinforce other recent research that shows Bangladeshis increasingly feel that their freedom of expression is being restricted and that survey participants may have been reluctant to speak on such sensitive subjects. It could also have a policy impact, as this low level of recognition could make it more difficult for the government to persuade citizens of the need for vigorous efforts to counter violent extremism. There is a deep well of supporters for the greater integration of *Sharia* law in Bangladesh, even if most citizens rejected violence as a means to achieve it. This finding suggests that both the government of Bangladesh and civil society could face significant challenges in neutralizing the triple threats of rising frictions between socially conservative Muslims and supporters of secularist views, growing social dislocation, and shrinking spaces for open public discourse.

# INTRODUCTION

Since the nation's independence in 1971, the secular principles upon which Bangladesh was founded have been challenged; in recent years, the country has faced a wave of violent extremism.<sup>2</sup> With the emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the regional franchise of Islamic State (IS) or Da'esh, the possibility has been raised that the paroxysms of violence that are the hallmark of these organizations may become more common in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> Home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations of more than 150 million people,<sup>4</sup> the country is seen as fertile ground for radical ideology and extremist violence.

In recent years, terrorists have brutally murdered secular bloggers, writers, and publishers and have targeted non-Muslim minorities. In July 2016, five youths claiming to be affiliated with Da'esh attacked the Holey Artisan Bakery in an upscale Dhaka neighborhood. Twenty-nine people were killed, including twenty hostages, two police officers, five gunmen, and two staff; eighteen of the twenty hostages killed were foreigners. Da'esh immediately claimed credit for the attack.<sup>5</sup> While these recent high-profile attacks have drawn the most attention, Islamist militant groups perpetrated some 147 attacks in the country between 2001 and 2016.<sup>6</sup> Even though public support for these groups presumably influences their ability to operate in Bangladesh, as well as the state's efforts to counter them, there have been little data to date measuring this support.

This research brief is based on a nationwide RESOLVE Network survey designed to address this gap. The survey instrument presented respondents with vignettes of actual terrorist attacks perpetrated by three important militant groups: the Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB); Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), an Al-Qaeda affiliate; and Da'esh. The instrument queried respondents' knowledge of the attack, support for the groups' stated goals, and support for the tactics they employed. It also collected demographic and other respondent-level information data that can be used to determine individual support for the goals and the means employed by the terrorists. It summarizes the views of Bangladeshis on the most prominent militant organizations operating in the country in the recent past and present. It exposes important variation in support when it is broken down by cross-tabulating it with variables indicating gender, education, and socioeconomic standing.

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2 Matthew Nelson and Seth Oldmixon, "Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence," RESOLVE Network *Bangladesh Research Report* No. 1, September 2017.

3 Da'esh is the Arabic translation of the acronym for the Islamic State in the Levant, also known as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). As a general rule, the RESOLVE Network refers to ISIS by this Arabic acronym.

4 Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html) (updated August 2017).

5 "Bangladesh Siege: Twenty Killed at Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka," *BBC News*, July 2, 2016.

6 START. 2016. Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from [www.start.umd.edu/gtd](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd).



# METHODOLOGY

This research brief draws on data from a face-to-face nationally representative RESOLVE Network survey of 4,067 households in Bangladesh. The survey was conducted from April 12-30, 2017. No large political events or incidents of violent extremism with the potential to impact the attitudes of those surveyed occurred while the survey was conducted. However, a number of anti-militant raids did occur during that time. These raids sparked fear among Bangladeshis in certain areas of the country. Five percent of survey respondents discontinued the survey due to questions about religion and militancy as a result of the sensitivity generated by the raids.

The survey utilized a stratified random sampling design that was nationally representative at division levels. Sample ratios were 50 percent male and 50 percent female and 75 percent rural and 25 percent urban. These ratios are in line with the 2011 Bangladesh Population Census.<sup>7</sup> Samples at the division level were assigned in line with the proportionate distribution of the population, including religion, as provided by the 2011 Census. All estimates were calculated using analytical weights. The survey response rate was 70 percent, similar to other surveys recording response rates of 75 percent in Bangladesh.

Initially, the survey was planned to reach 8,000 respondents. A little over halfway through its implementation, however, efforts to collect data were halted after local authorities requested that certain essential questions be removed from the survey itself. At the time that data collection was halted, the distribution of the sample that had been gathered was already representative of administrative divisions, gender, religion, and urban/rural dwellers in Bangladesh. A decision to continue the survey without the questions was rejected, given the representativeness of the sample already, and given that doing so would result in conducting what would be two separate, incomparable surveys. The original margin of error for the survey with a sample size of 8,000 was about 1.10 percent at a 5 percent level of significance. The margin of error for the reduced sample was 1.54 percent at a 5 percent level of significance. Despite its smaller than anticipated sample size, this survey remains more than four times larger than other public surveys, including Pew's Global Attitudes Survey.<sup>8</sup> The survey questionnaire was tested prior to gathering data in the field and implemented under the supervision of the Institutional Review Board. The questionnaire was undertaken in Bangla, Bangladesh's national language. Demographic information for each of the respondents was collected. Questions asked in the survey sought to elicit respondents' views on subjects including religion, governance, and violent extremism.

To understand Bangladeshis' awareness of and attitudes toward violent extremism, respondents were presented with brief accounts of actual domestic terrorist attacks, which included the stated goals of the attack and the tactics the groups employed. These vignettes summarized the following events:

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7 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "National Report Volume 1: Analytical Report," Bangladesh Population and Housing Census 2011, (Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, October 2015).

8 See "International Survey Methodology," Global Attitudes Survey 2014, Pew Research Center, [www.pewresearch.org/methodology/international-survey-research/international-methodology/global-attitudes-survey/bangladesh/2014](http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/international-survey-research/international-methodology/global-attitudes-survey/bangladesh/2014).

- The simultaneous detonation of hundreds of small bombs in sixty-three out of sixty-four districts of Bangladesh organized by Bangla Bhai, leader of the JMJB in August 2005;
- The assassination of Faisal Arefin Dipan, a well-known publisher of atheist publications, by members of the ABT, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda, in October 2015; and,
- The siege of the Holey Artisan Bakery in July 2016 by Bangladeshi militants, who killed non-Muslim hostages and dedicated their action to Da'esh.

Respondents were asked whether they were aware of each event. Knowledge about a particular group and the attack was a necessary gateway question for subsequent queries about personal views about the goals and tactics of the group's actions. Given that the overall literacy rate in Bangladesh is 58 percent, it was expected that many respondents would be unaware of the events presented in the instrument that were reported in the print media or online. Equally important, given that one of the attacks took place some twelve years prior to the survey, it is entirely possible that some people were too young at the time of the attack to recall it.<sup>9</sup> Respondents who indicated knowledge of the events in question were asked to rate their support of these organizations' stated goals using a five-point scale. They were then asked whether they supported the tactics that the group used to secure its goals, using the same scale (Table 1).

**Table 1** Goals and means of Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh

Militant Group	Goals	Means
Bangla Bhai (Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh) (JMJB)	Eliminate Bangladesh's judicial system and replace it with <i>Sharia</i>	The detonation of hundreds of small bombs simultaneously in sixty-three of sixty-four districts in August 2005
Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)	Stop the publication of secular materials	The assassination of Faisal Arefin Dipan, a publisher of secular materials, in October 2015
Islamic State (Da'esh)	Help establish <i>Sharia</i> throughout the world	The targeted killing of the non-Muslims during the siege of the Holey Artisan Bakery in July 2016

Surveys of this kind merit important caveats. The political environment in Bangladesh is increasingly restricted; in this same survey, more than one-third of respondents believed that individuals have very limited freedom in their expression of political views or their work on political issues.<sup>10</sup> This result is comparable to the findings of two other opinion polls conducted in 2015 and 2016, which found that approximately one-third of those surveyed did not feel free to express their political opinions.<sup>11</sup> Respondents may have

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, "State of The World's Children 2015 Country Statistical Tables," 2015.

[www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bangladesh\\_bangladesh\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bangladesh_bangladesh_statistics.html)

<sup>10</sup> Ali Riaz and Syeda Salina Aziz, "Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh: Surveying Support" RESOLVE Network *Bangladesh Research Brief* No. 3, September 2017.

<sup>11</sup> "Democracy International Releases Latest Survey Data on Bangladesh at Wilson Center," press release, Democracy International, December 8, 2016; "Bangladesh's Democracy: According to Its People," public opinion survey, The Asia Foundation, March 25, 2016.

indicated that they had not heard of a particular event as a way to opt out of the question. It is possible that this survey's estimates of those who have not heard of the event are biased downward. Similarly, respondents may not have been entirely forthcoming when asked about their support for the goals or means that each group employed in the events presented. It is strongly suspected that these findings present underestimates of knowledge of events, as well as support for the goals and tactics employed. There is no scenario imagined under which respondents would have exaggerated their knowledge of the events or their support of the goals or tactics used by the three groups included in the survey.

# THE MILITANT LANDSCAPE IN BANGLADESH

While at least of a half a dozen Islamist militant groups have been active in Bangladesh in recent years, this survey focused on three:

- *The Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB)* is closely related to the Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). The two groups are often viewed as more or less the same organization since they came under the leadership of Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqur Rahman (also known as “Bangla Bhai”). The group formed in 1998, but it did not become operational until the early 2000s.<sup>12</sup> JMJB’s most notorious attack occurred in August 2005 when the group set off 459 bombs simultaneously in sixty-three of Bangladesh’s sixty-four districts in effort to push the country into adopting *Sharia*.<sup>13</sup> The group has also been linked to recent violence in Bangladesh, including an incident in Dinajpur at the end of 2015 in which an Italian Catholic priest was attacked.<sup>14</sup> Information about leaders arrested since 2006 has revealed that they tend to be “educated in technical and vocational training colleges, and born and raised in urban areas.”<sup>15</sup>
- *Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)*, which has also called itself Ansar al-Islam and Ansar Bangla 7, is affiliated with Al-Qaeda and draws its inspiration from one of its former leaders, the late Anwar al Awlaki. The organization first appeared in 2007, but it did not draw significant attention until 2013 when it began viciously attacking secular writers and bloggers. It mobilizes youth extensively through its online presence, which propagates its jihadist ideology and disseminates training manuals to help plan and execute terror attacks. ABT tends to draw recruits from Bangladesh’s middle-class, educated youths.<sup>16</sup> It was banned in May 2015.<sup>17</sup>
- *Islamic State (Da’esh)* is a number of groups of militants claiming to operate under Da’esh, which has become increasingly common. Da’esh has claimed responsibility for several attacks on foreigners, members of the LGBTQ community, Shia, Ahmadis, Sufis, and religious minorities, among others.<sup>18</sup> In July 2016, those involved in the bakery attack were in contact with Da’esh and dedicated the attack in their name, although there is no evidence that Da’esh actively aided them.<sup>19</sup> In recent years, dozens of Bangladeshi nationals have gone to fight with Da’esh.<sup>20</sup> The group’s English-language magazine *Dabiq* recently offered a tribute to one Bangladeshi militant who died in Syria.<sup>21</sup>

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12 Ali Riaz, “Who Are the Bangladeshi ‘Islamic Militants’?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no 1 (2016): 2-18.

13 “A Look at Some Key Radical Islamist Groups in Bangladesh,” *Associated Press*, November 27, 2015.

14 “Bangladesh Hindu Priest Beheaded ‘by Islamic State’,” *BBC News*, February 21, 2016.

15 Riaz, “Who are the Bangladeshi ‘Islamic Militants’?”, 5.

16 Ibid, 2-18.

17 “Ansarullah Bangla Team Banned,” *Dhaka Tribune*, May 25, 2015.

18 See Farasha Bashir, “Rising Extremist Worries in Bangladesh,” *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2015; Julfikar Ali Manik and Ellen Barry, “Bangladesh Gay Rights Activist Is Hacked to Death,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2016; Devitra Dwibhashyam, “Hindu Man Hacked to Death in Bangladesh, ISIS Claims Responsibility,” *International Business Times*, May 1, 2016; “ISIS Claims Attack on Ahmadi Mosque in Bangladesh,” *Agence France Presse*, December 26, 2015.

19 Praveen Swami, “Dhaka Café Attackers Were Lightly Armed, Shared Single Gun for Photos,” *The Indian Express*, July 6, 2016.

20 Animesh Roul, “Spreading Tentacles: The Islamic State in Bangladesh,” *Terrorism Monitor* 13, Issue 3, February 6, 2015: 3-5.

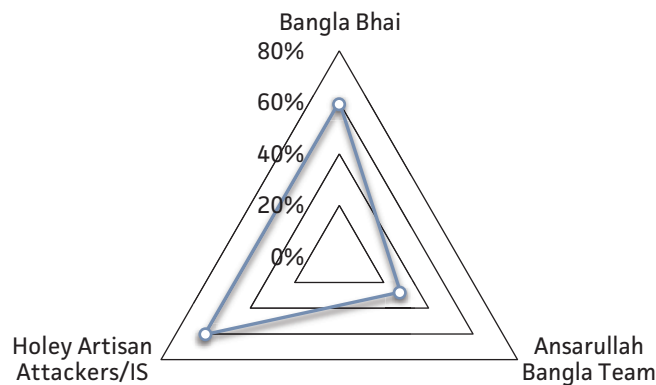
21 “Among the Believers Are Men: Abu Jandal al-Bangali,” *Dabiq* 14 (Rajab): 1-68; Tamara Khandake, “The ‘Islamic State’s Leader in Bangladesh Is Probably Canadian,” *Vice News*, June 8, 2016.

# FINDINGS

## Not All Bangladeshis Are Aware of Acts of Extremist Violence

A large proportion of the respondents reported being unaware of the three extremist attacks tested in this survey; this lack of familiarity varies across the events (Figure 1). While 60.2 percent had heard about wave of nationwide bomb attacks organized by JMJB in 2005, and 60.5 percent was aware of the siege at the Holey Artisan Bakery in 2016, only 27.4 percent was aware of the ABT assassination of the secular publisher in 2015.

**Figure 1** Knowledge about the militant groups and their activities

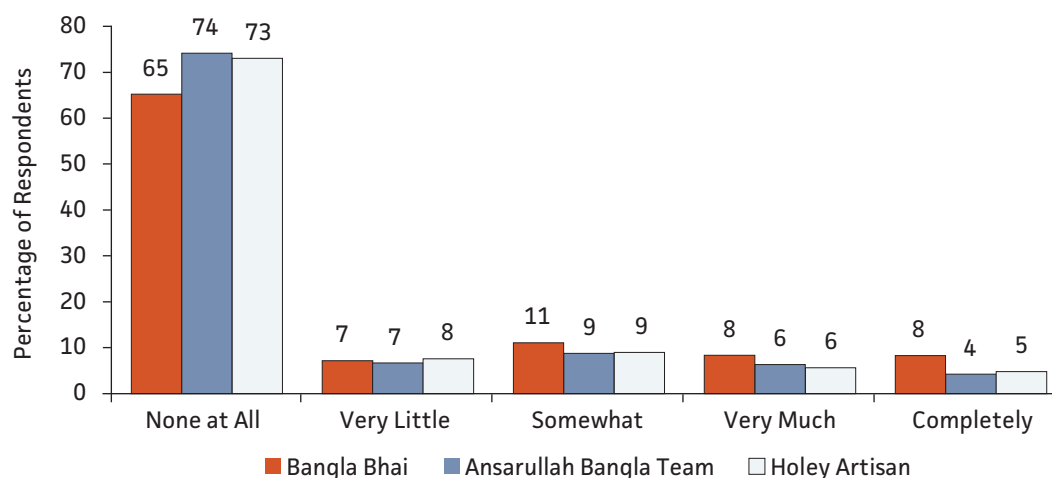


## Most Bangladeshis Who Are Aware of Violence Reject Militants' Goals, But Some Do Not

Solid majorities reject the goals of militant groups, but a sizeable minority does not. Respondents who were aware of the three incidents were asked if they supported the attackers' goals. While 65 percent of respondents said they did not support the goals behind the wave of bomb attacks coordinated by JMJB, another 34 percent did support them very little, somewhat, very much, or completely (Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> While 74 percent of respondents did not support the goal of ABT when they assassinated a leading publisher, 26 percent did to varying degrees. For those who knew of the Holey Artisan Bakery siege, another large majority of 73 percent of respondents did not support the goal of Da'esh of implementing *Sharia* globally as espoused by the attackers; 28 percent did to varying extents.

<sup>22</sup> Note that, due to rounding errors, the bins do not always sum to 100.

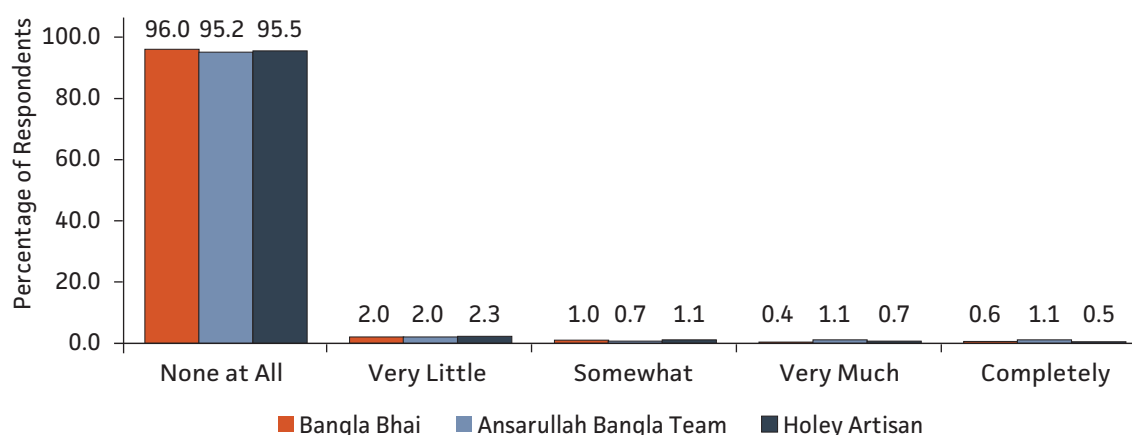
**Figure 2** Distribution of support for the goals of the attacks



## Most Bangladeshis Who Are Aware of Extremist Groups Reject Their Violent Tactics

Almost all respondents rejected violence as a legitimate means for these groups to pursue their ends (Figure 3). Support for the wave of bomb attacks launched by JMJB was very low; 96 percent said they gave no support at all to this tactic; a meager 4 percent supported bombing as a tactic very little, somewhat, very much, or completely. Just over 95 percent of respondents rejected the murder of a secular publisher committed by ABT, but nearly 5 percent of respondents supported the assassination in varying measures. Respondents also rejected the use of deadly violence in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack; almost 96 percent opposed it, while some 4 percent thought it was justified very little, somewhat, very much, or completely.

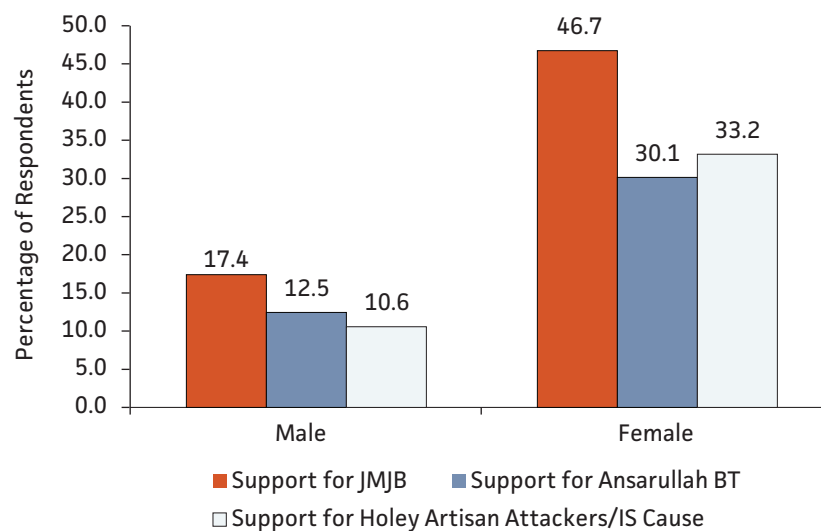
**Figure 3** Distribution of support for the means of the attacks



## More Women Support Violent Tactics than Men

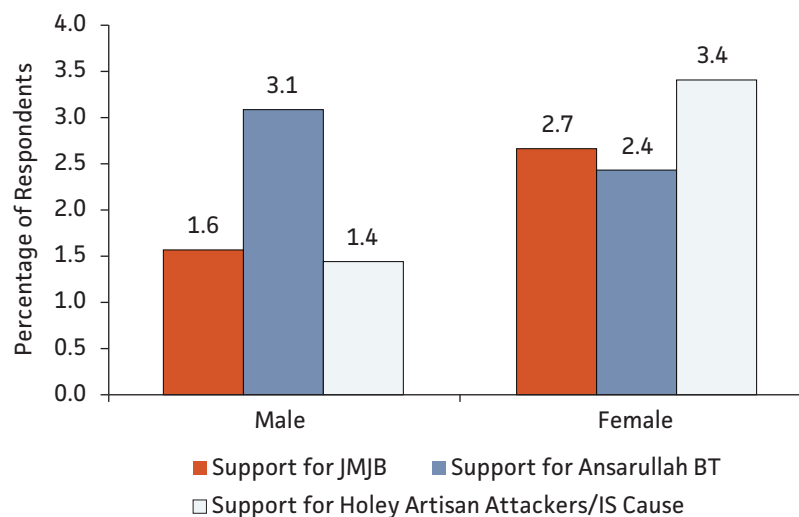
Among the small percentage that favored the goals and tactics of militant groups, the survey found stronger support among women than men (Figure 4). The difference was most pronounced for the 2005 JMJB-led wave of bomb attacks; 47 percent of women from this subset of respondents expressed support for the group's goal to implement *Sharia*; only 17 percent of men took the same position. Female respondents were also more likely to support the violent means of the attack (Figure 5), although the differences were smaller, and, in the case of the ABT assassination, statistically insignificant.

**Figure 4** Support for goals of militant groups, by gender



**Note:** The distributional difference is significant using the Chi Squared at the 0.01 level for all groups.

**Figure 5** Support for means adopted by militant groups, by gender

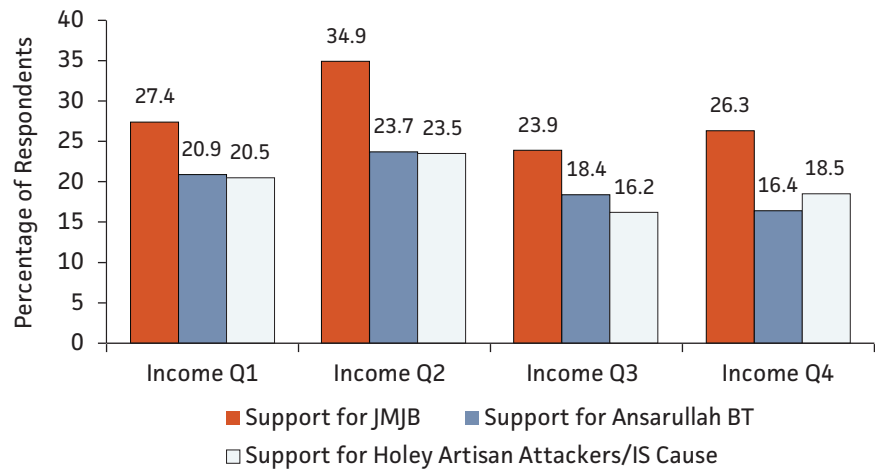


**Note:** The distributional difference is significant using the Chi Squared at the 0.05 level in the case of JMJB, at the 0.01 level in the case of the Holey Artisan attackers/IS, and not significant in the case of ABT.

# Higher-Income Bangladeshis Express Greater Support for Some Militant Groups

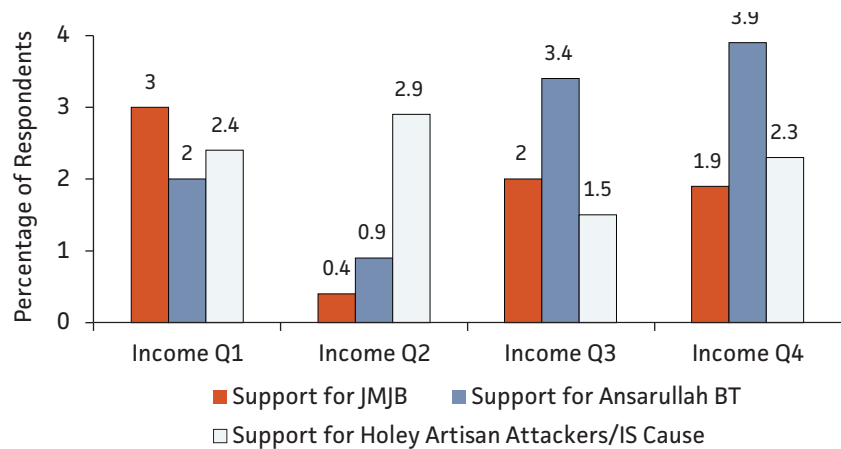
Among the subset of those who supported militant groups, those in higher-income groups tended to support the goals of JMJB for *Sharia* in Bangladesh and Da’esh for the implementation of *Sharia* globally (Figure 6). Income did not seem to be a significant factor in determining support for violent tactics (Figure 7). This analysis used monthly household expenditure as a proxy for income, as research has found that respondents are less likely to dissemble when asked about expenditures compared to direct questions about their income. It examined differences in support for goals and tactics across quartiles of expenditures; Q1 was the highest income group and Q4 was the lowest income group.

**Figure 6** Support for goals of militant groups, by income



**Note:** The distributional difference is significant using the Chi Squared at the 0.01 level in the case of JMJB, the 0.05 level in the case of the Holey Artisan attackers/IS, and not significant in the case of ABT.

**Figure 7** Support for means adopted by militant groups, by income



**Note:** The distributional difference is significant using the Chi Squared at the 0.05 level only in the case of JMJB, and not significant in the case of ABT nor in the case of the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers/IS.

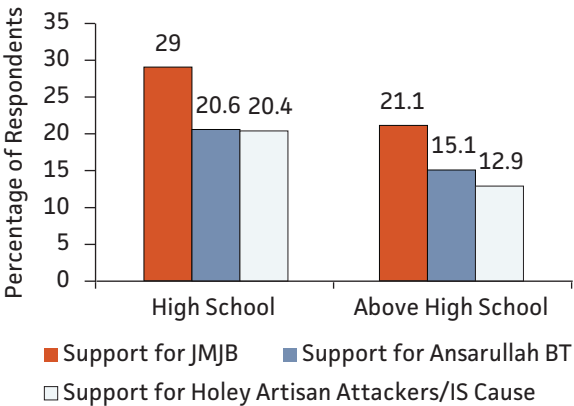


# More Educated Bangladeshis Show Greater Support for Assassination of Publisher

Among respondents who were part of the small percentage that supported militant groups, those with more education were less supportive of the goals of all three militant groups (Figure 8). However, a different pattern emerged when the focus shifted from the goals to the means (Figure 9). Whereas there are few differences in support for JMJB and Da’esh across educational groups, respondents in this subset with more education were more likely to support the assassination tactics employed by ABT against the noted publisher.

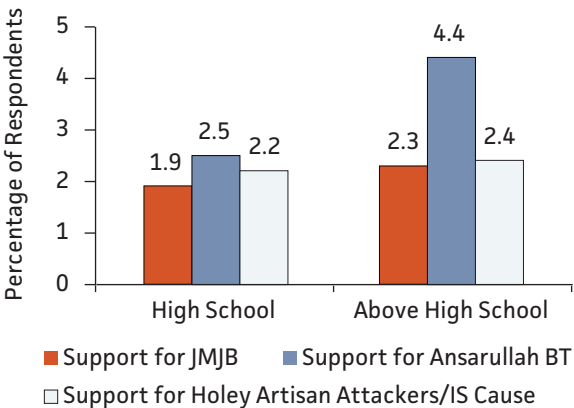
To come to this conclusion and measure how educational attainment influenced support for militant groups’ goals and tactics, respondents were divided into those with a high school degree or lower, and those who had studied beyond high school. Whether attendance at a nongovernment religious school (*quami madrassa*) predicted different levels of support for goals and tactics was also tested, but no statistically significant differences between the groups were found.

**Figure 8** Support for the goals of the militant groups, by education



**Note:** The distributional difference is significant using the Chi Squared at the 0.01 level in the case of JMJB and the Holey Artisan attackers/IS, and at the 0.10 level in the case of ABT.

**Figure 9** Support for the means of the militant groups, by education

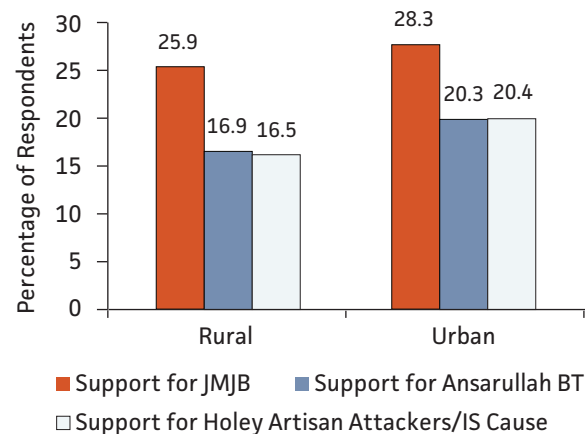


**Note:** The distributional difference is significant using the Chi Squared at the 0.10 level only in the case of ABT, and is not significant in the case of JMJB nor in the case of Holey Artisan attackers/IS.

# Support for Violence Is Not Influenced by Location

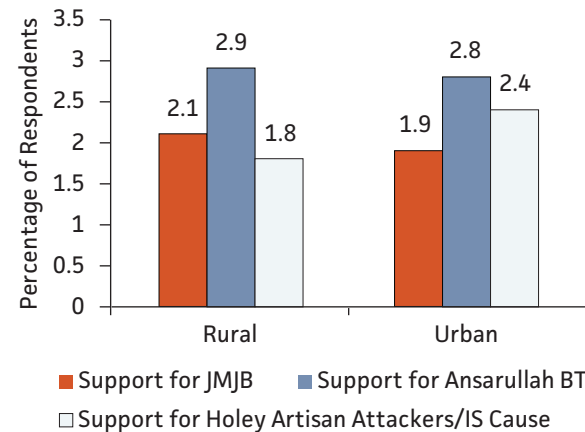
Among the small group who supported violence, rural respondents tended to support the goals of Da’esh, but not JMJB or ABT (Figure 10). No significant rural-urban differences were observed in support for the violent means used by any of the groups (Figure 11).

**Figure 10** Support for the goals of the militant groups, by location (rural/urban)



**Note:** The distributional difference is significant using the Chi Squared at the 0.05 level only in the case of the Holey Artisan attackers/IS and is not significant in the case of JMJB nor in the case of ABT.

**Figure 11** Support for the Means of the Militant Groups, by Location (Rural/Urban)



**Note:** The distributional differences are not significant using the Chi Squared for any group.

# CONCLUSIONS

While many respondents indicated no knowledge of the three attacks tested in this survey, the possibility cannot be ruled out that they were afraid to answer truthfully. As was noted in another analysis of data drawn from the same survey instrument, respondents became evasive when they were asked the most sensitive questions, such as those regarding minority views on *Sharia*. On those questions, the no-response rate increased dramatically. This same sample of respondents also acknowledged that one of the problems in Bangladesh's democracy is that they do not feel free to speak their mind.<sup>23</sup> If respondents' knowledge of these significant events is genuinely as low as the survey suggests, then there may be a policy impact. The government may have difficulty persuading citizens of the need for vigorous efforts to counter violent extremism. If citizens do not believe a problem exists, why would they support efforts to mitigate it, particularly if these efforts adversely impact their political, economic, or social lives?

Overall support for the specific tactics used by the three militant groups in the survey was low (around five percent), but terrorism is a low numbers game. Support does not need to be high for militant groups to be able to successfully recruit the militant manpower they require to conduct operations. This concern is compounded by the much larger pool of sympathizers this survey identified. While most respondents rejected the goals of the extremist groups, large minorities actually supported the goals of the attacks, even though they roundly rejected the means. A separate analysis based on the same survey found widespread support among Bangladeshis for *Sharia*, with women leading men in expressing this support.<sup>24</sup> Given that the goal of two of the three militant groups tested in this survey was to use violent tactics to implement *Sharia*, either domestically or globally, there may very well be a deep well of sympathizers who support their ends, if not their means. Only small numbers are needed to commit violent acts, and Bangladesh's 150 million Muslims provide an ample recruiting pool.

While the survey found some variation in support among respondents based upon their economic and educational backgrounds, the largest difference in levels of support for either the goals or tactics of militant groups was among women. This variation between men and women is an important finding, mainly because most efforts to counter violent extremism focus on men. The findings suggest that more effort should be focused on women, who are likely to have an important role in the decisions made by men in their households. Bangladesh has already witnessed the emergence of women terrorists, and these differences in levels of support based on gender may be an important measure of more significant changes that are taking place in the country's militant landscape.

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23 See Riaz and Aziz, "Do Bangladeshi Democrats Support Sharia?", 2017.

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# **Bangladesh and Violent Extremism: RESOLVE Network Research 2016-2017**

*Fact Sheet Series*

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## Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence

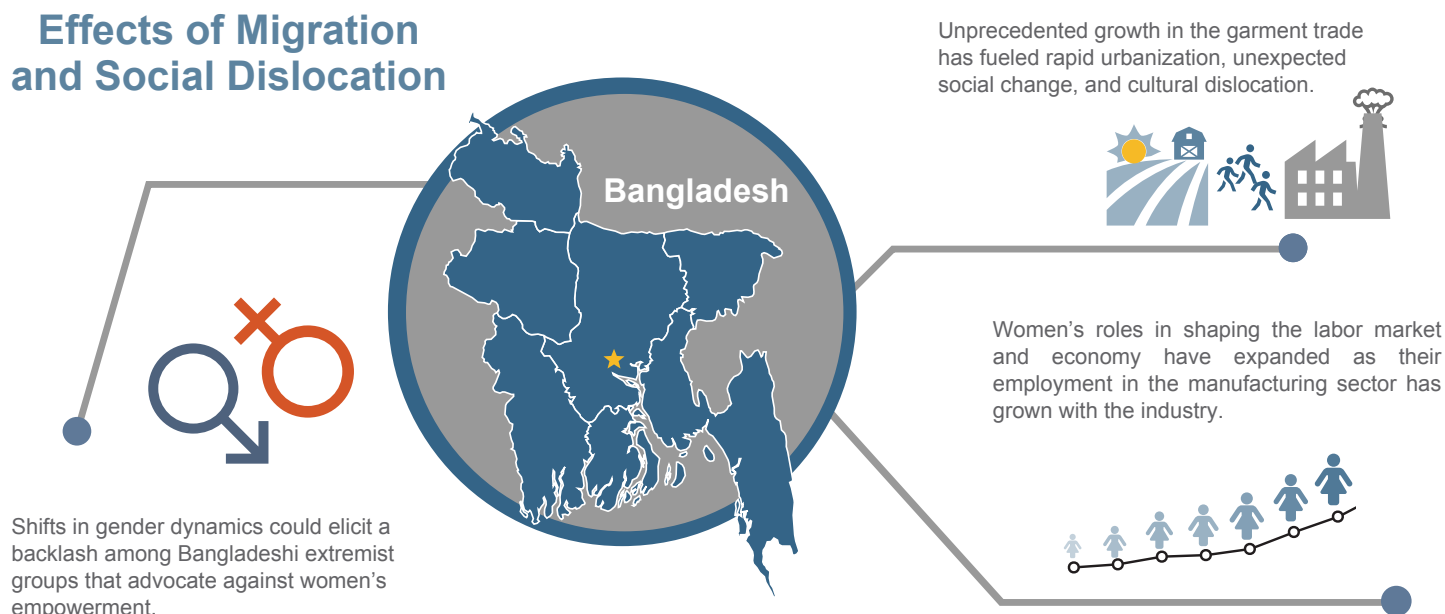
This fact sheet provides a snapshot of findings from the first RESOLVE Network mapping effort from RESOLVE's 2016-2017 Bangladesh Research Initiative. Findings from the study map emergent trends in political violence in Bangladesh and provide insight into the sharp rise of violent extremism in the country. The findings are supported by desk research and findings from three expert workshops hosted by the RESOLVE Network in Bangladesh and Washington, DC from November 2016 to April 2017. Discussions with stakeholders in Bangladesh and a desk review of the literature revealed critical gaps in current research, particularly with respect to the link between domestic dynamics and the wider international trends that have catalyzed a surge in politically motivated violence targeting civilians around the world.

To learn more about the research methodology and longer form findings, please refer to this fact sheet's companion RESOLVE Research Report: *Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence*.

### Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence

*Bangladesh appears to be entering a new phase of potential instability. The historical background, as well as the political and economic contexts in which these dynamics occurring, require careful consideration.*

### Effects of Migration and Social Dislocation





## Crafting a Response



Excessive use of deadly force by police against alleged violent extremists risks undermining the legitimacy of the state.



Bangladesh's long tradition of constitutional secularism appears, to some, to be fraying. This process could invoke negative perceptions of the government and its ability to uphold equal and fair treatment for all of its citizens.



## Closing Information Gaps

Following the July 2016 attack and an escalation in political violence, the imperative to better understand and address the challenges posed by the evolving social geography of political identity at home and violent social movements abroad is of increasing significance. Further research is needed to better understand the continued evolution of political and social dynamics and their relationship to violent extremism in Bangladesh.

### RESOLVE NETWORK

The RESOLVE Network is a global consortium of researchers and research organizations committed to delivering fresh insight into the drivers of violent extremism around the world. The Network provides access to open-source data, tools, and curated research to ensure policy responses to violent extremism are evidence based.

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POLITICAL VIOLENCE



GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY



IDEOLOGY



INTERVENTION DEMOGRAPHICS

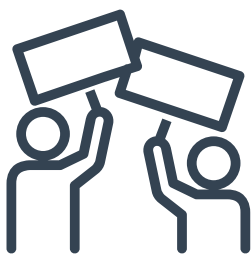


## The Language of Youth Politics in Bangladesh: Beyond the Secular-Religious Binary

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of findings from the RESOLVE Network's 2016-2017 Bangladesh Research Initiative. As part of the Initiative, RESOLVE Network researchers examined Bangladeshi views on the role of religion in public life. These key findings provide a glimpse into how youth perceive the parameters of Islam in public life. The findings were informed by key stakeholder interviews conducted in Dhaka during May and June 2017, a literature review, and workshops sponsored by the RESOLVE Network and its partners in Bangladesh. To learn more about the research methodology and longer form findings, please refer to this fact sheet's companion RESOLVE Research Brief: *The Language of Youth Politics in Bangladesh: Beyond the Secular-Religious Binary*.

### The Language of Youth Politics in Bangladesh: Beyond the Secular-Religious Binary

*The recent spike in political violence across the country signals a turning point in a decades-long struggle between those who consider the state to be secular and those who consider the majority-Muslim country to be associated with the principles of Islam.*

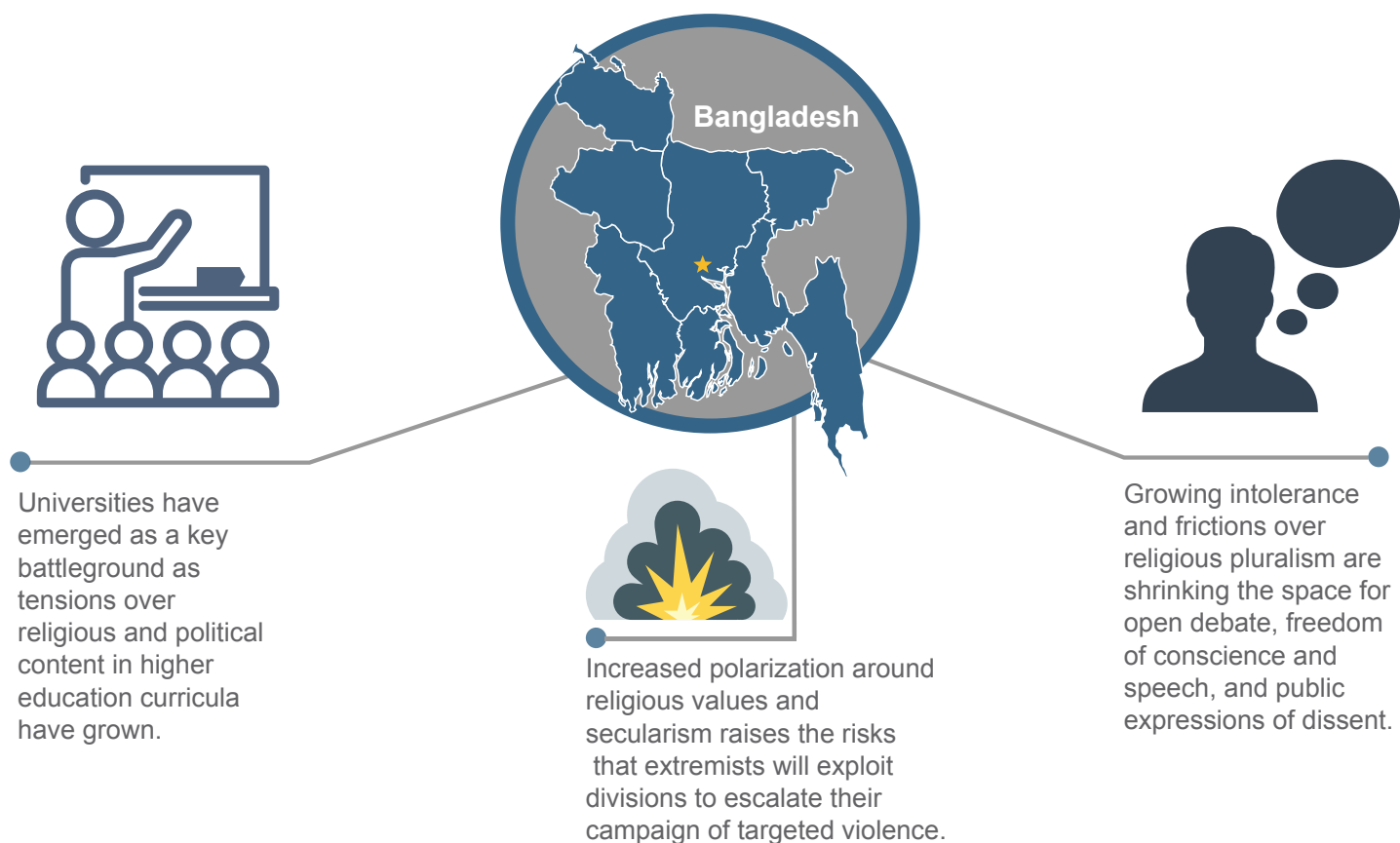


Social polarization over religious values affects nearly every facet of life in Bangladesh, drawing especially sharp lines over cultural and artistic expression.



There is a growing intra-religious divide between Bangladeshi Muslims over competing claims of piety that appears to fuel religious frictions and heightened social intolerance.





## Understanding Youth Narratives is Key

Greater attention to the role that narratives surrounding religion, secularism, and public life play in fostering or mitigating social polarization and violent extremism among youth is indispensable to any sustainable effort to address violent extremism. The extent to which alternative narrative campaigns are effective depends, in large part, on the degree to which they are informed by rigorous research and insight into the views driving existing schisms within local Bangladeshi communities. Locally-crafted and delivered counternarrative campaigns can provide the credibility and deep contextual insight local communities and actors already possess to contribute to such efforts.

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## Can Community Policing Help Counter Violent Extremism in Bangladesh?

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of findings from the RESOLVE Network's 2016-2017 Bangladesh Research Initiative. As part of the Initiative, RESOLVE Network researchers examined how those involved in community policing understood countering violent extremism and the extent to which a community policing approach might play a role in addressing violent extremism. The key findings presented below were derived from two major urban areas in Dhaka City Corporation that are proximate to major educational institutions and have a large youth population: Chawkbazar in Dhaka South, where Community Policing Forums are no longer active; and Uttara in Dhaka North, where Community Policing Forums remain active.

To learn more about the research methodology and longer form findings, please refer to this fact sheet's companion RESOLVE Research Brief: *Can Community Policing Help Counter Violent Extremism in Bangladesh?*

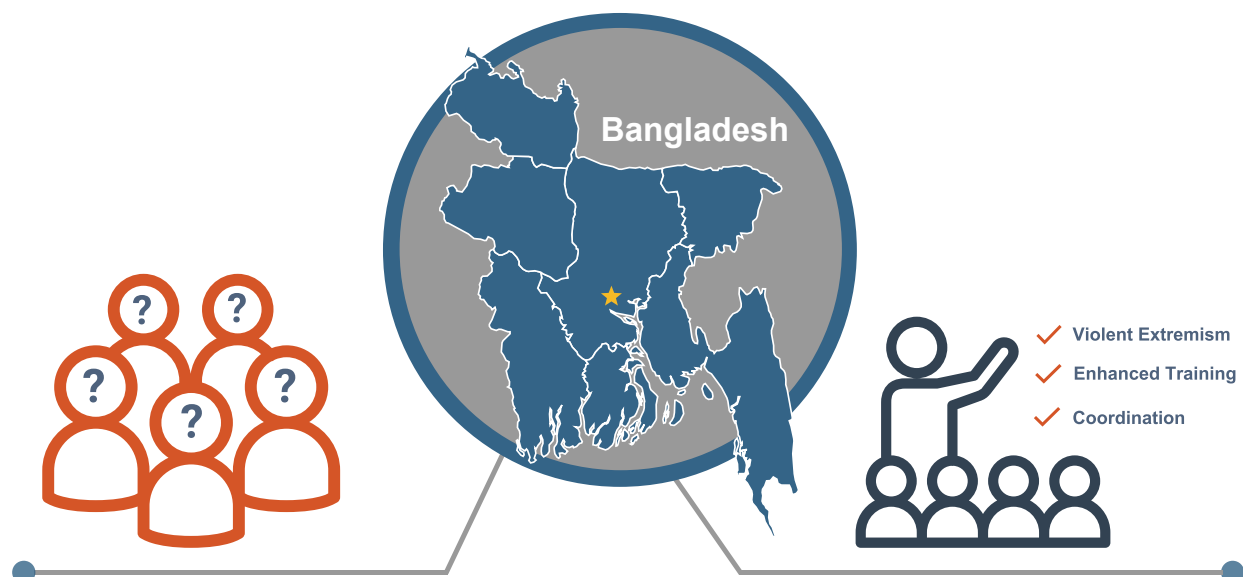
### Can Community Policing Help Counter Violent Extremism in Bangladesh?

*Community policing in Bangladesh is a potentially effective vehicle to improve security and complement the fight against violent extremism.*

The widening trust deficit between police and local communities presents a significant security challenge for Bangladesh.

Community policing could enhance cooperation to address violent extremism at the local level.





Community members are concerned about violent extremism and have conflicting views about their role in community policing and the role of youth.

Community policing policy and practice should include guidance on addressing violent extremism, enhanced training, and coordination with government and local institutions.

## Progress Through Effective Policing

A common grievance felt by communities is that they are merely an intelligence source for security actors. Security sector actors can make progress to actively reduce that grievance by altering security force training and promoting a more cooperative and open ethos. To accomplish this, security forces should be trained and encouraged to view communities as active and trusted partners with whom to share information on goals and objectives. Advancing a community policing model that promotes community-police cooperation, shared respect, and protection from retaliation can encourage both communities and police to more actively work together to address emerging violent extremist threats. In order to do so, current community policing models must be altered to focus more on actions and results and less on ceremonial functions. The existing community policing apparatus can also be better integrated with other security agencies that are more directly engaged with countering violent extremism and terrorism nationwide.

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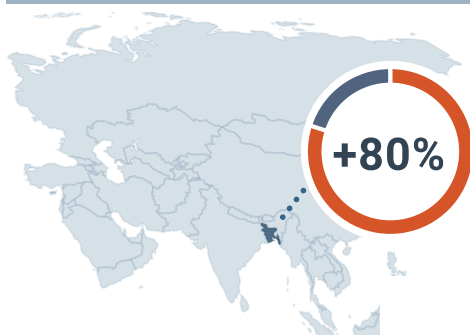
## Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh: Surveying Support

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of findings from the RESOLVE Network's 2016-2017 Bangladesh Research Initiative. As part of the Initiative, RESOLVE conducted a nationwide survey of 4,067 Bangladeshi respondents enumerated in April 2017. The survey included questions about three high-profile events of domestic extremist violence in the past twelve years, as well as key democratic principles, such as elected representatives, an independent judiciary, freedoms of speech and assembly, and property rights. Findings derived from the survey regarding democracy, governance, and Sharia provide insight into the depth of support for democracy among Bangladeshis, the values they attach to democracy, their perception of the current state of governance, and whether they view Sharia as an alternative to the common law legal system.

To learn more about the research methodology and longer form findings, please refer to this fact sheet's companion RESOLVE Research Brief: *Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh: Surveying Support*.

Democracy and Sharia  
in Bangladesh:

A face-to-face representative survey of 4,067 households in  
Bangladesh



of respondents  
agreed with  
the statements that  
Sharia would ensure:



Basic service provision



Personal security



Discourage corruption



Justice

### Divergent Views



Male respondents  
placed greater  
importance on  
democratic values.



Support for Sharia  
was notably stronger  
in rural areas and  
among women.



With respect to wearing the veil,  
hijab, or niqab, women almost  
unanimously supported their right to  
make choices about what they wore.

### Education



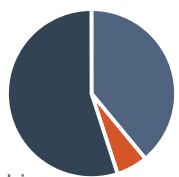
Support for democracy and  
elected leaders increased with  
greater educational attainment.



Those with higher levels of education  
were less likely to support the harsh  
physical punishments associated  
with Sharia.

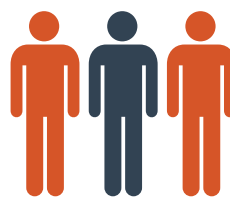
### Preference for Elected Leadership

**55%** expressed a strong preference for democratic, secular leadership.



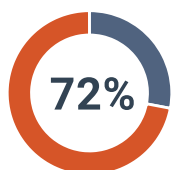
**39%** voiced support for a democratically elected religious leader

### Doubts about Elected Representatives



Nearly one-third of the respondents who valued living in a democratically governed country believed the country is not actually governed by those they elected.

### Views on Military versus Civilian Rule



of respondents said that they supported either complete or significant civilian control over the military.

### Support for a Legal System Based on Sharia



Just over **77%** agreed there should be a much larger role or a somewhat larger role for Sharia

### Perceived Association between Sharia and Good Governance



On average, **70%** of the respondents believed that Sharia uses harsh punishments to ensure obedience to the law.



About **78%** believed that Sharia would make it mandatory for women to wear a veil, hijab, or niqab.

## Good Governance is Critical

Findings from RESOLVE's research indicate that Bangladeshis unequivocally support the principles and values of democratic governance and need to see those values reflected in their interactions with state and party apparatuses. However, the research also indicated that the perceived gap between the theory and practice of democracy is encouraging citizens to look for alternatives to promote good governance, prevent corruption, and limit partisanship. Efforts to augment the rule of law and address issues of concern to Bangladeshi citizens is needed to ensure that citizens feel safe, secure, and fully represented by their government bodies.

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## Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: Public Awareness and Attitudes

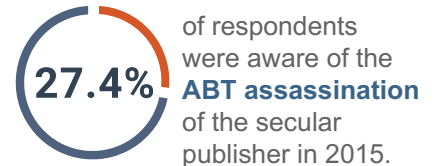
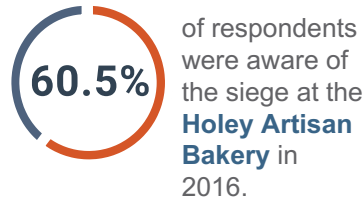
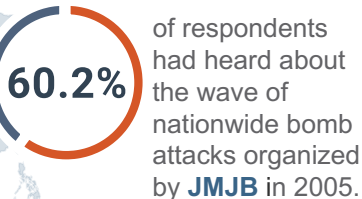
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To learn more about the research methodology and longer form findings, please refer to this fact sheet's companion RESOLVE Research Brief: *Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: Public Awareness and Attitudes*.

Islamist Militancy in  
Bangladesh:

A face-to-face representative survey of 4,067 households in  
Bangladesh

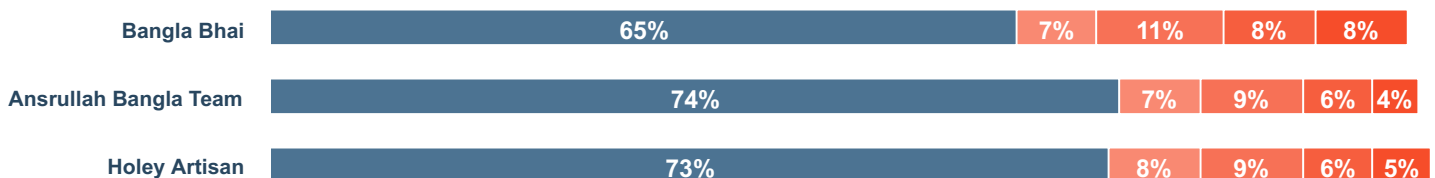
### NOT ALL BANGLADESHIS ARE AWARE OF ACTS OF EXTREMIST VIOLENCE



### MOST BANGLADESHIS WHO ARE AWARE OF VIOLENCE REJECT MILITANTS' GOALS, BUT SOME DO NOT



Solid majorities reject the goals of militant groups, but a sizeable minority does not.



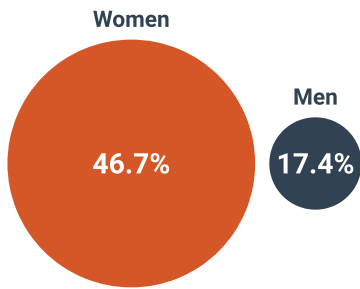
Distribution of Support: None at all

Completely

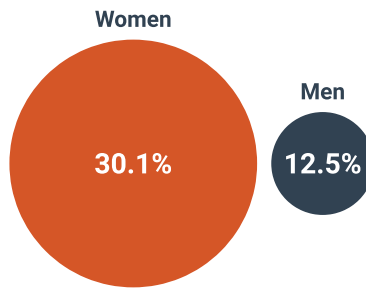


## MORE WOMEN SUPPORT VIOLENT TACTICS THAN MEN

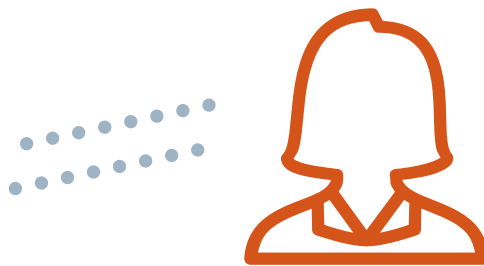
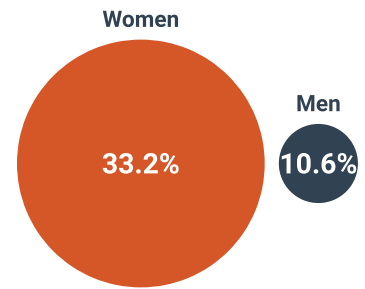
### Support for JMJB



### Support for Ansarullah BT



### Support for Holey Artisan Attackers/Islamic State Cause



The findings suggest that more effort should be focused on women, who are likely to have an important role in the decisions made by men in their households.

## Community Perceptions Matter

Understanding the context in which the local population perceives the goals and activities of militant groups is crucial to better understand the extent of those groups' popular support. While low across the board, indicators of empathy or support are largely correlated to weakness in criminal justice, policing, and community security. Among Bangladeshi supporters of militant groups, women represent a significant proportion, as do individuals in the middle and upper socioeconomic level. Understanding the resonance of militant narratives, tactics, and goals among these constituencies is needed to create more responsive interventions.

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Our partners operate in more than 25 countries where challenges with conflict are an everyday reality. We are passionate about amplifying credible local voices in the fight to mitigate the destabilizing risks of social polarization and political violence.

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