

Bangladesh Could Become Hub for Jihadists if It Continues Appeasing Islamic Radicals

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Violent demonstrations in Bangladesh, reportedly by activists from the Hefazat-e-Islam group, resulted in 12 people being killed during the Indian Prime Minister’s two-day visit on March 26. Narendra Modi’s visit was to celebrate Bangladesh’s 50-year anniversary since its independence from Pakistan. The anti-Modi riots highlighted an increasing problem in Bangladesh – an Islamist resurgence that has bad portends for South and Southeast Asia.

Hefazat, an influential group with a huge following despite only being formed in 2010, has tactically declared it is not a political party. However, its influence has been all-pervading and challenges the traditional moderate nature of Islam in Bangladesh that is heavily influenced by Bengali culture and language. The group came to prominence as it denigrates secularism and was courted by different political parties, including the ruling Awami League, because the parliamentary system requires mainstream parties to be in coalition with Islamist groups. Hefazat was seen as an antidote to the Jamaat-e-Islami, the principal Islamist political party in the country (that was banned in 2013). The group has thus been able to penetrate different strata of Bangladeshi society.

Bangladesh has seen an increase in terrorist activity in recent years, including attacks on foreigners, activists and religious minorities. The conventional thinking is that most radicals are poor, but this theory no longer holds as many of the perpetrators of these attacks include people from privileged backgrounds. News reports indicate that the Islamists believe that the secularists in Bangladesh are attacking Islam. Secularists, in their view, includes anyone who opposes extremist Islam and pursues cultural mores.

Bangladesh was founded in 1971 with secularism as an important tenet of the country’s foundation values. Secularism in Bangladesh today is being continually challenged by radical Islamists. The rise of radical Islam in Bangladesh began with the 1975 assassination of its founding leader, **Sheikh Mujibur Rahman**. With a military government ruling over Bangladesh, either directly or as proxy for the next 15 years, conservative Islamic views became more central in the country. This was so much so that in 1979, secularism was removed from the Bangladeshi constitution. In 1988, Islam was made the official state religion.

The number of state-sanctioned Islamic schools (madrasas) increased exponentially, from

1,830 in 1975 to 5,793 in 1990. But the biggest radical change in the country came in the 1980's when U.S.-backed Bangladeshi mujahideens returned from their anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. These veterans sought to transplant Saudi-sponsored Taliban-styled Islam to Bangladesh.

Although **Sheikh Hasina** won the 2008 elections and restored secularism to the Bangladeshi Constitution, the country remains an Islamic Republic. The Islamists do not win votes in elections but instead exert considerable societal and cultural power through madrassas, banks and other institutions.

In the last decade, Bangladesh's Islamists have resorted to street power to mobilize against secularism. In February 2013, when top Islamist leaders were convicted of war crimes committed during the 1971 Bangladeshi Liberation Struggle, one of main figures was given what the moderates considered a light sentence. A campaign began to demand his execution, but the Islamists countered this with a well-coordinated counter-protest led by Hefazat. As many as 500,000 people shut down major roads to the capital and interpreted the protesters demands as defaming their religion and Muhammad, the founder of Islam. The fact that Pakistani-backed Islamist militias killed hundreds of thousands of people during the Liberation Struggle was ignored by Hefazat.

In a 13-point list, Hefazat demanded the death penalty for blasphemy and an end to Bangladesh's education policy that they say prioritizes "secular" subjects like science and math over religious studies. To appease Islamist interests, the government agreed to meet some of their demands, including an expansion on the government's ability to crack down on those who "hurt religious beliefs" and for "acts of defamation."

Under this revised law, Bangladesh has arrested at least eight bloggers since 2013 for writing articles critical of the Saudi government and posting derogatory remarks about the founder of Islam. Police have used the defamation clause of the Information and Communication Technology Act and its replacement, the Digital Security Act of 2018, to silence criticism against the government. Between 2013 and 2018, over 1,200 people were charged under this law.

Bangladeshi preachers also aspire to shape society according to their interpretations of what constitutes "pure" Islam. Popular Islamic televangelists reach millions of people across the Muslim world, spreading the notion that Islam in the Indian subcontinent must be "purified" of non-Arab elements, ie. of all Indo influences. An example of Indo influence on Islam in the region is the Qawwali Sufi devotional singing which originated on the Indian subcontinent. Today, Qawwali singers are being targeted and/or killed in Pakistan and Bangladesh by Islamic fundamentalists.

Just as Pakistan became a hub for terrorists on India's western border, Bangladesh's descent into radical Islam could turn it into another jihadist hub, but on India's eastern border. By Pakistan becoming a hub for jihadists, it was able to spread terror into Afghanistan, Kashmir and other parts of India, as well as the wider region. In this way, Bangladesh, as a gateway into Southeast Asia, could galvanize and encourage already existing jihadists in eastern India, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia if it continues appeasing radical Islamists and refuse to return to the principles of their founding fathers 50 years earlier.

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