

Helpdesk Research Report: Bangladesh - Underdevelopment and Radicalisation

Date: 18/01/08

Query:

- (1.) What are the links between underdevelopment and radicalisation in Bangladesh?
- (2.) Is there any evidence that investments in development and poverty reduction have had an impact on radicalisation?

Enquirer: South Asia Division, DFID

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1. Overview

It is difficult to conclude whether there is a causal link between underdevelopment and radicalisation in Bangladesh. Many differing factors have been identified as contributing to radicalisation. While some experts cite poverty as a factor, the vast majority of experts and the literature focus more on political underdevelopment and poor governance; rampant violence, criminality and corruption; non-state service provision by Islamist groups, particularly in education with the expansion of *madrassas* (religious schools); and the lack of employment and other economic opportunities. Others also highlight dissatisfaction with US/UK foreign policy, particularly the war in Iraq; as well as struggles with identity and how to be concurrently Islamic and Bengali.

Poverty is connected to several of these other factors mentioned above. The vast majority of the population in Bangladesh are impoverished peasants with minimal access to resources and services; as such, many Islamist organisations have filled this gap in service delivery and have gained popularity. In addition, it is largely poorer families that cannot afford public school systems; and send their children to *madrassas*, which some claim promote extremist views. These developments alone do not necessarily contribute to radicalisation – as many Islamist organisations and *madrassas* do not promote such radical ideas. What experts and the literature highlight more as a cause of radicalisation is the lack of employment opportunities for graduates of private *madrassas*. Their traditional non-secular Islamic education does not provide students with skills for the job market; as such, graduates often remain unemployed or obtain jobs in mosques and *madrassas*. Political and legal underdevelopment, corruption and criminality are also key factors contributing to radicalisation. Widespread frustration with unfulfilled expectations after independence and a lack of confidence in successive governments have resulted in support for Islamist parties, which some argue has allowed for an increase in more radical groups.

Investments in poverty reduction in Bangladesh have included a large number of microfinance initiatives, which have helped subsistence needs for the poor, and specific sector investments.

However, microfinance has provoked strong negative reactions by some conservative Islamists, who claim that charging interest and providing women with loans, which brings them in contact with non-relative males, are un-Islamic. In addition, most microfinance programmes in Bangladesh target only the poor or the extreme poor, which does not address the better off segments of society who are also frustrated by the lack of employment and economic opportunities. At a broader level, investments to improve governance and the political dysfunction of Bangladesh are advocated as necessary to promote inclusiveness; and to curb frustrations with unmet expectations and the pull toward radicalisation.

2. Key documents

General

- Laksham, K., 2006, 'Islamist Radicalisation and Developmental Aid in South Asia', DISS Working Paper, no. 2006/8, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen: <http://www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/WP2006/DIIS%20WP%202006-8.web.pdf>

This paper looks at radicalisation in the South Asian Muslim World. Bangladesh is discussed on pages 13-18. The paper finds that, similar to Pakistan and Afghanistan, economic challenges; lack of education; a large network of extremist religious schools that have contributed to the radicalisation of youth; corruption and lack of faith in elected governments have contributed to the consolidation of Islamist extremism. For example, it notes that the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) has gained popularity because of its assumed 'protector' role in areas with widespread mal-governance. The report argues that madrassas (religious schools) are a breeding ground for terrorist in Bangladesh; and notes that recruitment is particularly prevalent in the loosely controlled Chittagong Hill Tracts.

- Lintner, B., 2004, 'Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh' in Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia, eds. S. P. Limaye, M. Malik, R. G. Wirsing, Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, Honolulu, pp. 413-436: <http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/ReligiousRadicalism/PagesfromReligiousRadicalismAndSecurityinSouthAsiach17.pdf>

This chapter looks at the rise in religiously and politically motivated violence in Bangladesh. It finds that the key factors behind this are:

- High levels of corruption in the country (Transparency International ranked Bangladesh as the world's most corrupt country in June 2001);
- The emergence of more radical Islamist groups and their intimidation of minority groups. The author notes that while the Jamaat-i-Islami may not be directly behind such attacks, their inclusion in government has made some radical groups believe they are protected and can act with impunity; and
- The lack of employment opportunities for graduates of independent, unregulated madrassas (Quomi/Deobandi). More "traditional" Islamic studies dominate in these schools: "poorly equipped to enter mainstream life and professions, the students are easily lured by motivated quarters who capitalize on religious sentiment to create fanatics, rather than modern Muslims" (p. 419). The youth organisation, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), which has close contacts with other radical groups in Pakistan, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, recruit new members from these madrassas.

- Hossain, M., 2006, 'The Road to a Sharia State? Cultural Radicalisation in Bangladesh', White Paper, Hudson Institute, Washington, DC: http://www.hudson.org/files/pdf_upload/Maneeza.pdf

This paper claims that Bangladesh has the potential to become a core location for radical Islamists, whose objective is cultural radicalisation - instilling Islamist values in Bangladeshi culture. The madras education system; publications, broadcasts and sermons are methods used to achieve this. The paper asserts: "The main reason why cultural radicalisation has been

possible in Bangladesh is not related to culture. The spread of corruption, the degradation in government services, and the ensuing waning of confidence in the political system have created a fertile ground for the implementation of a bait-and-switch method: promoters of cultural radicalisation offer social and economic services and imbue them with ideas, values, and cultural elements in conformity with their ideology. Bangladeshi citizens take advantage of these needed services and in the process are subject to a program of cultural radicalisation. This process has created a situation akin to a state-within-a-state in Bangladesh” (p.9). The author argues that in order to counter cultural radicalisation, it is important to reject the purported dichotomy between Islam and Bengali culture emphasised by promoters of such radicalisation.

Political Issues

- International Crisis Group, 2006, ‘Bangladesh Today’, Asia Report, no. 121, International Crisis Groups, Islamabad/Brussels:
http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_asia/121_bangladesh_today.pdf

1) Links: This report identifies dysfunctional politics and Islamic militancy as twin threats to Bangladesh’s democracy and stability. The report argues that poverty cannot be the primary reason for increased militancy, as Bangladesh’s economy is considered healthy; and there has been progress on the MDGs. Other stabilising factors are a free media and strong civil society; and a sophisticated electorate that has historically rejected religious extremism at the polls. Instead, the report asserts that the rise in Islamic militancy is attributable to dysfunctional politics, popular discontent and violence. ‘Dysfunctional politics’ in Bangladesh is comprised of weak institutions, a dysfunctional Parliament, lack of confidence in the judiciary, a weak and politicised bureaucracy, corruption, widespread criminality and violence. Islamist parties, particularly Jaamat, are seen as cleaner than mainstream parties – providing interest-free Islamic microcredit programmes and other schemes, such as providing water pumps aimed at those close to the poverty line. In addition, mainstream politicians – i.e. the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have cultivated radical Islamists when politically expedient. The report also notes that the problem with the madrassa system lies not necessarily in the content (although religious, it is not extremist); but rather in frustration from the inability of graduates to secure employment due to the lack of practical skills learned.

2) Investments: The report advocates for donor support that addresses the wider issues and counters political dysfunction; however most aid does not focus on governance or building capacity. Instead, they focus on specific sectors – e.g. health.

- Datta, S., 2005, ‘Political Violence in Bangladesh: Trends and Causes’, Strategic Analysis, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 427-447: <http://www.idsa.in/publications/strategic-analysis/2005/jul/Sreedha%20Datta-1.pdf>

This paper argues that rampant political violence is a much greater problem in Bangladesh than religious extremism and militancy. There is widespread dissatisfaction with unfulfilled expectations of a free and non-oppressive state after separation from Pakistan. Political violence in Bangladesh involves violent tactics used by political parties and groups opposed to the government; and rampant violence towards women. Violence on university campuses has also become common as universities have become a staging area for political parties and radical student movements. The paper documents that Bangladesh has become more religious over the past few years. Key political parties, such as the Awami League have shifted toward the right in order to win the growing proportion of religiously inclined electorate; and since 1992, religious parties (Jama’at and Islami Oikya Jole) have gained ground. The paper cautions that external militants operating within Bangladesh (largely responsible for the increased terrorist attacks) have formed links with internal extremist groups and criminal elements – which has contributed to large scale violence. While this is of concern, the paper emphasises that there is no fear of unbridled growth of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh because of its strong civil society and because of the cultural characteristic of the state: Sufis and Islamic preachers have spread religion by adapting to local cultural customs; and state owned madrassas go beyond traditional Islamic curriculum and include Bengali as a compulsory subject.

- Datta, S., 2003, 'Bangladesh's Political Evolution: Growing Uncertainties', Strategic Analysis, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 233-249: <http://www.idsa.in/publications/strategic-analysis/2003/april/Sreeradha%20Datta.pdf>

This paper addresses how political instability and poor governance in Bangladesh have contributed to the rise of religious extremism. Rampant crime, the flow of small arms and violence, and the inability of government to curb it, has led to increased dissatisfaction with the government. In addition, in order to capture power, the two main political parties, Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have engaged in coalition building with Jama'at and adopted more overtly religious positions to win voters. This process, the paper argues, allowed for a growth in extremism.

Socio-Economic Issues

- Hasmi, T. I., 2004, 'Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh' in Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia, eds. S. P. Limaye, M. Malik, R. G. Wirsing, Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, Honolulu, pp. 35-72: <http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/ReligiousRadicalism/PagesfromReligiousRadicalismAndSecurityinSouthAsiach3.pdf>

1) Links: This chapter examines the various factors behind the rise of political Islam in Bangladesh; and finds that there is no conclusive evidence of so-called Taliban activities. It emphasises that Islamic movements are unique in Bangladesh in that they are primarily rural-based and agrarian: more than 80% of the country's population are impoverished peasants with lack of incomplete access to means of production; lack of power, security of tenure; and lack of viable means of sustenance and employment. The author discusses the history of Islamists and support for them, in particular the Jamaat-i-Islami: "In Bangladesh, the bulk of the Jamaat-i-Islami cadres, if not the leaders, are not madrasa-educated mullahs, but are from the various petty bourgeois classes representing the middle and poor peasantry, petty businessmen and shopkeepers, school teachers and other underemployed and unemployed classes. Many of them can be classified as members of the peripheral "vernacular elite" or graduates from Bengali medium institutions—the least preferred in the private sector job market. They nourish a tremendous sense of deprivation and, like their Algerian, Egyptian and Iranian counterparts, have the potential to turn very violent and anarchical. And their madrasa-educated counterparts—even poorer and almost totally unemployable in both the public and private sectors other than in low-paid teaching positions or as employees of mosques—are also angry and frustrated with anything that goes in the name of secularism and modernism (p.69) ... [T]he real danger comes [not necessarily from the peasant class but] from the disgruntled lower middle classes and the various lumpen elements in society. The broken promises of the successive governments since independence, which have delivered more of the same—hollow promises, corruption, unemployment and misery, adversely affecting the loyalty of the petty bourgeoisie and the fast disappearing middle classes—may trigger the rise of the Jamaat as the alternative of the so-called liberal democratic and secular parties" (pp.71-72).

2) Investments: The chapter also discusses microfinance interventions, designed to reduce poverty and empower women. It notes that this has alienated village elders and mullahs who are upset by this challenge to patriarchy; and believe that they promote "anti-Islamic" activities, by bringing women in close proximity of unrelated men. There has been a subsequent backlash directed at NGO workers in the countryside and a proliferation of anti-NGO fatwas.

- Barkat, A., 2005, 'Economics of Fundamentalism in Bangladesh: Roots, Strengths and Limits to Growth', Paper prepared for the Conference on Religious Fragmentation and Economic Development in South Asia, 15-16 October, Cornell University, Ithaca

This paper argues that the rise in religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh can be attributed to the failure of the Bangladeshi state to satisfy peoples basic needs; rising criminalisation of the economy and politics; increased inequality and youth unemployment; the communalisation of culture and education; and a lack of confidence in mainstream political leadership. This in turn has influenced political Islam in the country. The paper explores the 'economics of

fundamentalism' – the economic strengths of the religious fundamentalist forces. It documents a vast range of enterprises (e.g. large financial institutions, household credit, mosques, madrassas, trade enterprises etc.) that are run by ideologically motivated persons who contribute at least 10 per cent of their net profits to political organisation – sufficient to finance the salary of 500,000 full timers in fundamentalist politics. These financiers also set up their own representatives in key government positions – adding political power to their economic power.

Educational and Unemployment Issues

- Ahmad, M., 2004, 'Madrassa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh' in Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia, eds. S. P. Limaye, M. Malik, R. G. Wirsing, Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, Honolulu, pp. 101-115:
<http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/ReligiousRadicalism/PagesfromReligiousRadicalismandSecurityinSouthAsiach5.pdf>

This chapter discusses the historic and current role of madrassas in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. It notes that the madrassa system is supporting close to 6 million students in the three countries, combined, and that these students come mainly from poor families that cannot afford modern schools. The report is very critical of presumptions that madrassas are synonymous with religious extremism, militancy and terrorism. It notes that the curriculum has not changed for 150 years; and thus, cannot be the primary explanation for an increase in such activities in recent years. Further, it argues that the vast majority of such traditional Islamic studies are not revolutionary, radical or militant. The report also explains how the system in Bangladesh differs from that of Pakistan; in Bangladesh, there are two types of madrassas:

- Quomi, which are private and supported by religious endowments and/or charity (it is estimated that there are over 6,500 of such schools, with approximately 1.5 million students and 130,000 teachers). The financial independence of the Quomi schools have allowed for an independent religio-political power base of the ulema (religious scholars), who have been resistant to state reforms to bridge the gap between traditional Islamic education and modern sector education; and
- Alia, which is government supported and controlled (2000-2001 data reported 6,906 schools). These schools teach a range of modern subjects and their degrees are recognized by the government.

- Datta, S., 2007, 'Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat from Within', South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 145-170: available via <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a777400391~db=all~jumptype=rs>

This article argues that religious militancy – home grown war militants waging war against their own people – is the key problem in Bangladesh, as opposed to terrorism. It identifies the increase in madrassas as an important factor contributing to this militancy; and attributes this increase partially to insufficient state funding for education and the inability of the state to provide education in rural areas. The paper reports that there were more than 64,000 religious schools at the end of 2002 (as compared to 1,830 in 1976); and the percentage increase in the number of students registered in religious schools is much greater (818%) than that of ordinary secondary schools (317%). The limited learning of secular subjects results in higher unemployment rates for those attending religious schools. The paper asserts that such permanent unemployment, combined with a radical world view, have made many poverty-stricken youth more susceptible to criminal, militant and terrorist activities.

Microfinance Initiatives

- Hulme, D. and Moore, K., 2006, 'Why has Microfinance been a Policy Success in Bangladesh (and Beyond)', Global Poverty Research Group, Oxford:
<http://www.gprg.org/pubs/workingpapers/pdfs/gprg-wps-041.pdf>

This paper looks at the key microfinance institutions (MFIs) in Bangladesh and evaluates the success of the industry. The primary goal of MFIs is poverty alleviation or reduction; and they perceive financial liquidity problems as a central reason for poverty. The paper reports that approximately 80 per cent of poor households in Bangladesh are covered by microfinance

services. A joint World Bank-Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies from the late 1990s found that on balance, there have been positive economic and social impacts. The programmes helped the poor through consumption smoothing and asset building. They also improved women's empowerment, children's school attendance, and awareness of and demand for health services. Further, the growth of microfinance service provision has created a large number of jobs in the sector.

- Sobhan, R., 2007, 'Participatory Development in Bangladesh', Valedictory Address at the 16th Biennial Conference of the Bangladesh Economic Association, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka

This paper discusses ideas on how to make development in Bangladesh more participatory and problems associated with such efforts. It looks as well at the limits of micro-credit: the gains in individual income are not sufficient to change the social status of the borrower; individual loans do not necessarily translate into collective action; and while such credit does assist with subsistence needs – they do not significantly reduce poverty. In addition, the paper points out that microcredit provision has segregated millions of clients from the regular capital markets, which continue to serve the elite. It recommends that emphasis be placed on improving the status of the resourceless through:

- their acquisition of assets and access to capital markets through MFIs leveraging borrowings;
- collective action of the resourceless – e.g. corporate enterprises, cooperatives and community based organisations;
- the transformation of NGOs into corporations of the resourceless – following the BRAC model; and
- the democratisation of governance – including the resourceless in political institutions.

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Websites visited

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