

The Road To A Sharia State?: Cultural Radicalization in Bangladesh

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Located in a hidden corner of South Asia, poised to become either a thriving democracy or a failed state, Bangladesh has the potential of becoming a major front in the global confrontation with radical Islamism. If democracy is preserved and enhanced, Bangladesh can serve as a model of how to counter radical incursions into Muslim democratic environments; if democracy is defeated, this will be the first such victory for radical Islamism and will likely unleash a global wave of radical Islamist activism, similar to that following the Islamist victory over the Soviet-backed Communist regime in Afghanistan.

The fact that Islamists in Bangladesh have been striving to lay the foundation of a Sharia state is no secret. Their efforts present a complex set of difficulties for democratic life in the country, similar to those faced by democratic systems that had allowed the activities of Communist parties prior to the fall of the Soviet empire. In the case of both Communism and Islamism, we are faced with ideologies that tactically accept the democratic rules of the game in order to promote and eventually establish a system that negates democracy. The issue in Bangladesh is two-fold:

(1) There might not be a sufficient appreciation of the nature of the Islamist threat. Some doubt that the program of the Islamists includes the establishment of a

Sharia state, or they are skeptical of the Islamists' ability to reach their goal.

(2) There

is no counter program in effect to address the comprehensive character of the Islamists' agenda, notably in the area of cultural radicalization.

To date, attempts by those aware of the risks of cultural radicalization have only deepened the effects of the Islamist program.

Defining Cultural Radicalization

Radicalization is the attempt to "restore" a society's cultural purity by reconnecting it to practices and in rights with an idealized Golden Age distant in space and time. This so-called restoration often comes at the expense of the society's actual historical and cultural legacies. In the case of Bangladesh, the cultural radicalization sought by Islamists posits a fictionalized "society of the Prophet" that overshadows the lived and shared experiences and traditions of the millennia-old Bengali culture. Bengali culture at its apogee was a synthesis of Islamic values and local traditions and practices. Islam has always been an integral part of Bengali culture, while Bengali culture has been the backbone of the moral, intellectual, literary, and societal life of the Muslims of Bengal.

As part of their program of cultural radicalization in Bangladesh, Islamists have created a dichotomy between a fictionalized monolithic Islam and a local culture redefined and rebranded as Hindu, but this is an artificial dichotomy that is better understood as a top-down expression of power and control than as a reflection of a genuine native conflict. This expression of power does in deed have antecedents, notably in the attempt by the former West Pakistani leadership to subjugate and regiment their East Pakistani subjects. Even prior to the rise of independent Pakistan, a similar expression of power was manifested in Mughal times in the promotion of Persian and Urdu as languages of the elite at the expense of the local culture.

The process of cultural radicalization in Bangladesh today is propelled by this history of top-down control as well as by the current global experience of Islamism across the Muslim world. The cultural radicalization currently faced by Bangladesh has the potential of instituting longer-term cultural conflicts. Addressing it is necessary in order to maintain local stability and to face down the threat of political radicalization that it feeds. The issue of cultural radicalization, both cause and effect of the political radicalism that has surfaced, has been underreported and little investigated. Slowly but surely, proponents of a monolithic understanding of Islam have been implementing elements of their program of cultural "purification." Their means range from the peaceful to the violent.

Bangladesh, traditionally a tolerant and pluralistic society, is therefore experiencing the possibility of an irreversible transformation. While members of civil society who support a more open conception of society, culture, and politics fail to react to the emergent threat with any coherent program, we must ask ourselves whether this impetus for transformation and the lack of response to it reflect a changing cultural mood in Bangladesh, or whether they are due to extrinsic political factors. More importantly, can Bangladesh survive as a pluralistic and tolerant society, or is it indeed witnessing a fateful evolution towards religious regimentation?

Background

With a population of over 145 million, Bangladesh is home to the third-largest Muslim community in the world. The former East Pakistan (previously East Bengal) has had a tumultuous political history since gaining its independence in 1971. Of particular note are the assassinations of two presidents who were also the founders of the major political parties that dominate Bangladeshi politics to this day. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the charismatic leader of the Awami League (AL), whose daughter Sheikh Hasina is the current opposition leader, was killed in 1975;

and Ziaur Rahman, the founder of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the main partner in the ruling coalition (now led by Rahman's widow, Khaleda Zia), was killed in 1981.

After almost a decade of military dictatorship, the restoration of the democratic process in 1991 brought a new era of political vigor to Bangladesh. However, the political system was prone to corruption. Successive elections relied heavily on patronage and cronyism, leading to a growing disenchantment with the democratic process and the two main political movements. This gave Jamaate-Islam, the prominent Islamist party that is now part of a coalition with the BNP, an opportunity to promote a platform seeking the fundamental transformation of Bangladeshi society through the eventual creation of a Sharia-based state.

It is not surprising that Islam should play a role in Bengali politics given how deeply rooted Islam is in Bengali identity and history. The important function of Islam in Bengali life prompted even secularist ideologues, such as Mujibur Rahman, to seek to accommodate it. It is the exploitation of Islam's central role in Bengali identity and the refusal to acknowledge any other components of this identity that become the hall-mark of Islamist activism.

That the Jamaate has a long-term plan for Bangladesh is not a secret. Born of Islamist revivalist thought in the first half of the twentieth century, the Jamaate has moved with other Islamist groups throughout the world to embrace some precepts of Salafism, a rigid understanding of the Sharia-based state. In so doing, it has paved the way in Bangladesh for the emergence of Salafi groups. These have made their entry into the cultural and political scene through conservative ulemas (religious scholars) inhabiting mosques in many districts of the country, and through the militant jihadist group Jamat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

The Jamaate advocates the establishment of a Sharia state through the violent overthrow of the established order. In accordance with a pattern of penetration adopted by a multitude of sister

Islamist organizations world wide, the Jamaate is also seeking a presence in student, worker, and professional sectors. Its gains have been considerable, although they are still checked by an established tradition in Bangladesh of religion-free activism in all three sectors.

The Current Evolution of Cultural Radicalization

Those seeking cultural radicalization in Bangladesh have sought both to promote ideas and to act. The ideas have sought to suppress other ideas in the cultural marketplace, and the actions undertaken have often been violent and coercive. Some of the promoters of cultural radicalization have systematically targeted key communities. Journalists have been singled out for harassment and not-so-occasional assassinations; authors have been muted or ostracized; NGO workers have been threatened. The overall result of these actions is the creation of an atmosphere of fear that has affected the traditional tolerance that Bangladesh has historically enjoyed. A brief survey of the changing face of Bangladesh through a sampling and categorization of incidents and attacks illustrates the gravity of the situation.

The actions taken in the service of cultural radicalization can be labeled either retrospective (those targeting the history and traditions of Bangladesh) or prospective (those seeking to influence the country's future through its youth). Retrospective actions include the systematic attack on free thought and expression and the invasive transformation which targets the creative and artistic communities. Prospective actions include the rise of the madrasas in order to prepare the next generation of culturally "pure" youth. These two approaches have compounding cumulative effects on culture in Bangladesh and are altering its current face and reshaping it along Islamist ideological lines.

It is possible to identify at least six different groups targeted by the promoters of cultural radicalization as they seek to implement their program of purification:

(1) "Hindu," (2) "Christian," (3) heretics or apostates, (4) minorities, (5) those considered

socially deviant, and (6) critical voices.

1. The “Hindu” Target:

The quotation marks around “Hindu” indicate its use by the radicalizers as a euphemism for various traditional components of the Bengali cultural legacy not sanctioned by the Islamist utopia. This target includes many aspects of culture in Bangladesh, from the music that dots every-day life, to cultural celebrations, to matters of dress and other visual display, to the political process itself. The millennia-old Bengali New Year celebration, until recently a cultural staple in Bangladesh, is now ignored, contested, questioned, and occasionally even the scene of violent attacks. In a spontaneous popular reaction to these attacks, many Bengalis now embrace this celebration even more energetically. The fact remains, however, that the initiative is in the hands of those who challenge it.

2. The “Christian” Target:

“Christian” serves as the radicalizers’ euphemism for any and all components of public life that stem from the pool of cultural, political, educational, and social facets of Western civilization. The use of English as a language of communication, the reliance on democratic institutions (such as the Constitution), the wearing of Western-style dress, are all viewed as markers of a Christian contamination of Bangladesh and are met with the call for purification.

3. The “Heretic” Target:

“Heretics,” according to the radicalizers, are those Muslims who choose a path of belief in contradiction with the monolithic faith promoted by radical Islamists. The Ahmadiyya South Asian Islamic religious movement, which the radicalizers refuse to acknowledge as Islamic, has been a favorite target. Ahmadiyya mosques have been attacked, and Ahmadiyya families have been ostracized and occasionally subjected to violence.

Promoters of cultural radicalization have introduced intolerance and calls to violent

actions into the normal public discourse in Bangladesh, while the government reacts with apathy, or, in some cases, seems to assist the radicalizers: even English-language dailies will publish the dates and locations of the intended attacks on Ahmadiyya mosques, and the Religious Affairs Ministry bans publications, sales, and distribution of literature by the Ahmadiyya community.

4. The “Minorities” Target:

With the term “Hindu” now being affixed to Bengali culture in general, the actual Hindus are further relegated to a more marginal status, that of the physically undesirable/un - acceptable. Hindus and other religious minorities live under constant threat, their lives dominated by the feeling of being systematically targeted. Public statements by radical politicians, as well as the brutal targeting of symbols of Bangladeshi open culture, have reinforced this atmosphere of fear.

An effective ethnic cleansing program was implemented in Bangladesh even before the rise of organized cultural radicalization. Hindus, at one point a sizeable minority within the Bangladeshi population, are today a vanishing relic of times by gone. The promoters of cultural radicalization view this loss suffered by Bangladesh as a victory in their cultural jihad.

5. The “Socially Deviant” Target:

“Deviant” social behavior, according to the stated and unstated positions of the promoters of cultural radicalization, is often associated with women, and in particular women activists. The status, physical appearance, and behavior of women that fail to conform to the radicalizers’ view of what is acceptable is labeled deviant.

Across the Muslim world, Islamist movements have measured their success by their ability to alter and control women and to box them into predefined support roles. The place of women in traditional Bengali society was not restricted to the private realm. Promoters of cultural radicalization in Bangladesh have therefore been rather shy in their attempts to force women into conformity with the segregation standard. How ever, from separate seating at Jamaate events to the absence

of women at public events, it is apparent that an implicit project of segregation and marginalization is in effect.

While mainstream Islamist movements in Bangladesh have been careful in handling the women issue, NGOs and women activists have been regular targets of under-ground movements connected to the cultural radicalization project.

6. The Critical Voices Target:

It has been suggested that Bangladesh is enduring a project for theocracy and a project for autocracy. Both projects negate the traditional Bangladeshi practices of open communication, tolerance, freedom of expression, and diversity of opinions. This suggestion may be subject to debate.

What is not is that many journalists and opinion makers have been dismissed, harassed, battered, and imprisoned by the government and Islamist groups. Even voices that are constructively critical are rebuked as damaging the country's image. This official, or quasi official, atmosphere of intolerance feeds upon the cultural radicalization project and, in turn, nourishes it. The end result is the potential slide of Bangladesh away from its hard-earned status as a free and open society.

Current Responses To Cultural Radicalization

As noted, the cultural radicalization project in Bangladesh is a top-down effort with an ideological impetus. It has generated diverse reactions, some spontaneous and some deliberate. All these reactions can be seen, depending on their origin, either as social responses or political counteractions. Social responses have been numerous. From the use of the teep (*bindi*) on the forehead, to the revival of Bengali-style fashion at the various socio economic levels, Bangladeshi society has displayed its desire to preserve its diverse cultural legacy and not to succumb to the uniform vision espoused by the promoters of cultural radicalization. Resistance to the radicalization effort has also taken the

form of art that documents, continues, and develops the cultural legacy of Bengal. New artists, vocal as well visual, are offering works rooted in Bengali traditions to an appreciative wider public. Although not explicitly conceived as or offered as a comprehensive rejection of cultural radicalization, this art, retaining its individual and unorganized character, constitutes an organic resistance movement that is virtually impossible to defeat.

As to the political counteractions, these have been as varied as the forces that inhabit the Bangladeshi political spectrum. The configuration of political currents in Bangladesh can be schematically rendered, from the extreme "left" to the extreme "right," into five divisions, each of which has reacted to cultural radicalization in its own way:

1. Socialist and Communist movements at the extreme left

have preserved a nationalistic tone in their discourse and have therefore been consistently critical of cultural radicalization, often by linking it to the antirevolutionary forces that fought against the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. For these movements, cultural radicalization echoes the era of East Pakistan and their rejection of it on political as well as social grounds. These leftist movements view the current rise of Islamism in Bangladesh as a continuation of an attempt by Pakistan to reinsert itself in Bangladesh and gain back its 1971 losses. It should be pointed out that while some Pakistani agencies and political players have played a role in the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh, reducing the phenomenon of cultural radicalization to a mainly Pakistani intervention, as these movements do, ignores the latent native factors that are contributing to it.

2. The left-of-center mainline political movement, the Awami League, heir to the Founder of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, posits itself as the secular (if not secularist) response to the project of cultural radicalization. The AL has displayed an awareness of the spread of the phenomenon and repeatedly announced a deliberate program of cultural reinvigoration to address it. Some components of

this program are at the grassroots level and therefore not readily measurable in their effect and impact. However, a clearer comprehensive plan for the AL remains to be articulated.

3. The right-of-center Bangladesh National Party

maintains that the two main components of Bangladeshi culture, namely the Bengali heritage and the Islamic contribution, exist in a stable equilibrium. BNP officials have often noted the resistance of Bangladeshi culture to any induced change and therefore have characterized warnings against cultural radicalization as politically motivated and/or alarmist. However, this BNP assessment ignores the reality of an incremental but steady alteration of the cultural landscape of Bangladesh. Furthermore, it inadvertently masks some of the more radical change taking place through the ruling coalition it formed with the Jamaate-Islam.

4. To the right of the BNP, the Jamaate

favors the cultural radicalization that the country is witnessing — without applying the label “radicalization” to it. Jamaate officials might stress the peaceful character of their Islamization. However, their actions and words tell another story. The extremity of the Jamaate’s true beliefs is evident in the statement of a Jamaate official who characterized the induced flight of Hindu Bangladeshis from the country as similar to the human body getting rid of excrement.

5. To the extreme right are the radical Islamist underground movements,

which, driving the violent implementation of the cultural transformation, can be expected not to have any complaint about it, except perhaps its slow pace. What this quick overview indicates is that Bangladesh urgently needs a counter-program to cultural radicalization that takes into account the symptoms of its implementation (indicated by its six aforementioned targets), its methods, and the deep causes of its success, however limited. Such a program cannot be reactive, and it cannot let the promoters of cultural radicalization define its areas of operation.

The Methods of Cultural Radicalization

Although violence has been the most prominent of the methods pushing towards cultural radicalization, it is by no means the sole or main vehicle for this program. Two other methods have been part of the radicalizers' arsenal: cultural saturation and a method best characterized as bait-and-switch. The backbone of the cultural saturation method is the previously mentioned madrasa-alternative education system, as well as publications, broadcasts, and sermons designed to instill in Bangladeshi culture Islamist values. While in a free society the Islamists' program would compete with other ideas and values, the atmosphere of fear in Bangladesh has destroyed the level playing field. Any approach to the problem of cultural radicalization will have to have as its main objective the restoration of an atmosphere where competing ideas can be freely exchanged.

The main reason why cultural radicalization 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 radicalization 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 radicalization. This process has created a situation akin to a state-within-a-state in Bangladesh, as explained below.

Since independence in 1971, the Jamaate has developed institutions parallel to the government's. Citizens of Bangladesh view themselves as immune to the risk of religious extremism. And yet, societies have engendered alternative egos that posit Sharia as the ideal of rule, at the expense of their democracy. Jamaate-Islam of Bangladesh may never have had official connections with other national Islamist movements. However, Jamaate's grassroots mobilization and political action methods resemble those of other movements. The model is one that capitalizes on the

inefficiency, corruption, and lack of political vision in the mainstream, providing alternatives in practice, morality, and ideology. In the cases of Bangladesh, the respective Islamist movements have behaved not as conventional political parties, which monitor the government's performance and point out deficiencies, but rather as the kernel of an alternative system altogether.

For example, where state schools fail to provide lunch for students, the Jamaate sponsored madrasas not only furnish lunch, they also offer after-school tutorials for students. In so doing, the madrasas become competitors to the state schools, creating an alternative network that incorporates religious education. To the poor and pious of Bangladesh, this combination of lunch and God is an attractive package that trumps what any public school can offer. Needless to say, the kind of religious education provided in these madrasas is a militant version with its own understanding of what is the pure Islam, one that clashes with traditional practice prevalent in Bangladesh.

In the banking sector, the Jamaate-influenced Islamic Bank has been outperforming other banking institutions. This has effectively created a parallel economy that fosters Islamist businesses while remaining out of the mainstream control of the state. In what may be an ominous sign of further Islamization of the banking system, the largest state bank was recently purchased by Saudi interests. Public medical care in Bangladesh is full of gaps, but the Jamaate-sponsored Ibn Sina Hospital provides state-of-the-art health services that were unheard of in the country until recently. In the health sector, as well as education and banking, Jamaate institutions are viewed as models of performance, efficiency, and integrity. In addition to providing necessary services for the population at large, these Jamaate institutions are excellent venues for employment for young professionals associated with the Jamaate movement.

Where the state has failed in providing the expected services in education, banking, health, and social welfare, the Jamaate has stepped in

with exemplary albeit highly ideological institutions. The result is the creation of an effective state-within-the-state, one that does not rely on conventional measures to assert its influence. The number of seats in parliament is of little relevance in understanding the power of the Jamaate. The Jamaate's twelve seats are often dismissed by those who refuse to see the growing impact of Jamaate institutions all over Bangladesh. The criterion used here does not take into account the fact that the Jamaate seeks power through transforming society, not through gaining parliamentary seats. All indicators point to the fact that this transformation is taking place. Most Bangladeshis engage in wishful thinking when they convince themselves that this change is not real, or, at worst, real but contained. They need only look west to countries such as Lebanon to see what a presumably containable state-within-a-state can bring to a thriving society.

Conclusion: Suggestions For A Comprehensive Strategy

If cultural radicalization is about inducing conflict where none has existed, the response to it should not be simply to accept that a conflict exists and defend the component of culture that is considered under attack. Islamist cultural radicalization targets Bengali culture.

Countering it should not be a mere defense of Bengali culture, but instead a rejection of the posited dichotomy between Islam and Bengali culture. Bangladesh can assert pride in its Islamic heritage without having to pass a test of Islamicity artificially imposed by the promoters of cultural radicalization. Furthermore, Bangladesh can declare its embrace of global civilization in all its facets, including democracy and secularism, without feeling the need to justify it in Islamic (or more appropriately, Islamist) terms. Addressing the growing threat of cultural radicalization requires this spirit of no apology.

The plan to counter cultural radicalization has to be based on solid premises: (1) Recognition of the universality of human rights and values and a

rejection of their attribution to a Western or Christian origin. Malaysia's societal Islam, Islam Hadari, can be invoked as a form of Islam that accepts traditional cultural practices. (2) An insistence on the intrinsic relation between Islam not only as a culture and a civilization but also as a religion, with Bengal as land, society, and history. In other words, any artificially posited dichotomy between Bengali identity and Muslim identity must be rejected. (3) A positive insistence on the future of Bangladesh as a state for all of its citizens, with a recognition of the ancient and proven Islamic values of tolerance, diversity, and acceptance of others Muslim or not and rejection of the new Islamist conception of a monolithic Sharia state. (4) An insistence on zero tolerance for any movement, ideology, or political group that uses violence and intimidation as a way of achieving its aims, and the development of a national consensus towards that effect.

Proponents of liberal democratic values have often claimed the innate compatibility of the notions they advocate with Bangladeshi culture. The current situation is indeed the test of this view, which holds that the country's current climate of intolerance is a transformation brought about by promoters of radical political views. It is against a backdrop of political corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency that promoters of radical movements present themselves, often credibly, as a counter model of efficiency and integrity. The cultural dimension is therefore not their primary offering. It does, however, follow. Presented as the "true" form of the religion to a pious society, the transformation progresses, often as a by-product of the political dimension.

The implications of this phenomenon in Bangladesh are also considerable in the Bangladeshi diaspora. Cultural radicalization paves the way for political movements that often espouse violence as the means for change. Europe has already experienced the effects of a radicalization that originated overseas. The future of cultural radicalization is conditioned on the success of its promoters in positing a clash of cultures in Bangladesh. Defusing their program and thereby

avoiding their program's ensuing political adventurism can be achieved through reclaiming the cultural space and denying them the institutions that they have usurped.

P.S.

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