



Policy Forum Report

Political Islam and its Effects on Transitioning Countries: Contemporary Developments in Bangladesh

May 2, 2013

Introduction

On May 2, 2013 the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the topic of political Islam and its effects on transitioning countries, with a particular focus on Bangladesh. The following is a summary of the views expressed and insights that emerged from that discussion.

Background

Bangladesh has often been viewed by outsiders in a negative context as a country that embodies a range of misfortunes and offenses, from flooding to slave labor. It has long been considered home to one of the world's most corrupt governments, ranking for many years at the bottom of Transparency International's Corruption-Perception Index. However, the 2008 elections were hailed as a major step forward that would bring this South Asian state into what appeared to be a new era of democratic governance.

Recently, this expected leap forward has been threatened by political party tactics and tensions, the controversial International Criminal Tribunal (ICT), the growing mobilization of political Islamist activists, mounting interreligious tensions, and civil uprisings in response to poor working conditions. These factors grow ever more complex in light of looming 2014 elections and the recent disbandment of the constitutional, non-partisan caretaker government, which has traditionally been charged with overseeing free and fair elections. In addition, the political friction between India and China is placing Bangladesh at the geopolitical center of an increasingly tense situation.

Domestic Environment

Economics

Bangladesh is the second largest garment exporter in the world after China, and the development of its garment industry is largely a result of removing U.S. export barriers. However, that industry is plagued by poor working conditions, as illustrated by the collapse of the garment factory in April 2013 that killed over 1,000 workers. Thus, there is a growing tension between human rights and economic concerns.

Microfinance programs also play an important role in Bangladesh's economy, despite certain criticisms about the high interest rates being charged and heavy-handed collection techniques. These programs have served as a model for other parts of the world, including some close to home, like Appalachia.

Women, Youth, and Education

Bangladeshi youth make up roughly 60% of the population. While many still do not attend secondary school, school enrollment figures do reveal a diminishing gender gap, as 55% of all girls are currently in school. This increase in female school enrollment is attributable in part to the dual successes of the garment industry and micro-financing, but it is also taking place in a context of enhanced women's empowerment.

Religion, Politics, & Law

Bangladesh is home to the fourth-largest Muslim population in the world. The role of Islam in politics has, in recent years, become an increasingly divisive issue. In 2009, the Awami League, a leftist secularist political party and Bangladesh's governing party since 2008, set up an International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) to try individuals accused of war crimes during the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan. Nine of the eleven individuals prosecuted have been leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, suggesting that Awami might be manipulating past historical grievances and the ICT to carry out an anti-Islamist (and therefore anti-opposition) agenda. Further undermining the legitimacy of the ICT, communications have been leaked revealing cooperation between the Chief Justice and prosecutors in orchestrating verdicts. This apparent discrimination is not limited to the ICT. The government has cracked down on freedom of the press by shutting down media outlets and detaining journalists that cover or support opposition movements. In addition, in the leftist-controlled entertainment media, antagonists are frequently portrayed as Muslims, reinforcing a leftist perception of devout, practicing Muslims as extremists.

Disputes between the Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami are dividing the entire country. While Pakistan and East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh) separated from India as one Islamic nation, East Pakistan's subsequent independence movement established its own non-Islamic state. For most Bangladeshis, the partition was political and economic, not religious. Yet as political and social tensions rise, Bangladeshis seem to be identifying less with the state and more with their religious or ethnic identities; violent protests about the ICT issue occurred along ethnic and religious lines. As political aspirations are increasingly tied to religious identity, continuing political oppression of Islamists risks pushing this identity conflict to the point of civil war akin to that which occurred in Afghanistan. Already, a growing divide between Islamists and non-Islamists in the general Bangladeshi population is becoming apparent. A poll conducted in early February depicted a near-equal division between Islamist and non-Islamist responses, with a marked contrast between rural tendencies toward Islamism and urban tendencies away from it.

Some fear that rural areas may provide a support base for developing extremist Islamist groups. Many Bangladeshis believe their government is oppressing Muslims. If the persecution of Islamist parties persists (and especially if people facing the death penalty under the ICT are convicted), extremists may resort to vigilante justice and venting their outrage on others. Already, there are reports of attacks on religious minorities like Hindus and Buddhists, believed to be a response to the new secularist government's treatment of Islamist groups. Furthermore, there have been increasing demands for anti-blasphemy laws. In May 2013, thousands of Islamist activists marched in support of these laws, leading to violent clashes with security forces that resulted in more than twenty deaths. The marches were organized by Hefajat-e-Islam, a fundamentalist Islamist group that proposes radical changes to the Bangladeshi Constitution,

including enforced segregation of the sexes and imposition of the death penalty upon those who blaspheme the Prophet Mohammad.

Recommendations for the United States

Many participants felt that it would be in the best interest of the United States to take action to prevent the escalation of conflict in Bangladesh, so the situation does not devolve into a civil war or facilitate a greater suppression of rights. While mindful of the limitations on the effectiveness of any prospective U.S. involvement, given that many Bangladeshis perceive America and the West to be anti-Islamic, participants suggested the following as possible options:

- Encourage, pressure, and/or offer incentives for the Bangladeshi government to abide by the rule of law, act transparently, and protect the human rights of all citizens, including political Islamists and religious minorities. This might include suggesting that ICT activities be overseen by the UN or another neutral 3rd party, according to international legal norms. In view of the Bangladeshi government's indifference to previous efforts by the U.S. Ambassador and Special Envoy to engage on these issues, the United States could consider offering incentives such as economic assistance, free-trade privileges, or military collaboration, possibly engaging the support of allies such as Qatar for increased leverage.
- Provide or facilitate human rights and rule-of-law training to Bangladeshi government officials, police, lawyers and judges, and civil society organizations.
- Provide or support educational initiatives, especially those that promote religious tolerance, and support interfaith dialogue and the development of multi-faith civic associations, which have been shown to reduce violence in other countries where they exist.
- Support greater American-Bangladeshi partnerships, such as "sister cities" programs, and facilitate increased opportunities for Bangladeshi youth to study in the United States. Among the more obvious benefits, such programs would reduce the commonly-held perception of most Bangladeshis that America or the West is inherently opposed to Islam.
- Support micro-financing programs, especially for women, and link economic cooperation to the protection of human rights.
- Host forums (facilitated either by the US government or an American NGO) to promote (1) reconciliation between the ruling Bangladeshi government and the opposition parties and (2) discussion and cooperation between American and Bangladeshi scholars, lawyers, and other actors on promoting human rights, rule of law, good governance, and reconciliation in Bangladesh.

****Post-Forum Update***

Following this Policy Forum, religious tensions in Bangladesh have continued. In July 2013, the ICT sentenced Ali Ahsan Mojaheed, the secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islami, to death¹ and 91-year-old Ghulam Azam, seen as Jamaat-e-Islami's spiritual leader, to 90 years in jail.² These convictions were followed by violent protests by both the religious opposition and by the supporters of the Tribunal who see any sentence less than capital punishment to be too lenient. According to the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission, at least 289 people were killed throughout Bangladesh in July³, reflecting the growing instability in the country. Finally, on August 1, 2013, the High Court of Bangladesh ruled Jamaat-e-Islami to be illegal, thereby banning the party from participating in general elections next year, a ruling that predictably sparked violent protests across the country.⁴

**The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that prevents and resolves ethnic, tribal, and other identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.*

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/17/bangladesh-islamist-leader-sentenced-death-war-crimes>

² <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/16/world/asia/bangladesh-verdict-protests>

³ <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/index.php?ref=MjBfMDhfMDFfMTNfMV8xOTBfMTc4NTQ4>

⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/01/us-bangladesh-ruling-jamaat-idUSBRE9700KH20130801>