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A New Hub for Terrorism?

In Bangladesh, an Islamic Movement With Al-Qaeda Ties Is on the Rise

By Selig S. Harrison

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While the United States dithers, a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement linked to al-Qaeda and Pakistani intelligence agencies is steadily converting the strategically located nation of Bangladesh into a new regional hub for terrorist operations that reach into India and Southeast Asia.

With 147 million people, largely Muslim Bangladesh has substantial Hindu and Christian minorities and is nominally a secular democracy. But the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) struck a Faustian bargain with the fundamentalist party Jamaat-e-Islami five years ago in order to win power.

In return for the votes in Parliament needed to form a coalition government, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has looked the other way as the Jamaat has systematically filled sensitive civil service, police, intelligence and military posts with its sympathizers, who have in turn looked the other way as Jamaat-sponsored guerrilla squads patterned after the Taliban have operated with increasing impunity in many rural and urban areas.

To the dismay of her business supporters, the prime minister gave the coveted post of industries minister to Matiur Rahman Nizami, a high-ranking Jamaat official who has helped promote the growth of a Jamaat economic empire that embraces banking, insurance, trucking, pharmaceutical manufacturing, department stores, newspapers and TV stations. A study last year by a leading Bangladeshi economist showed that the "fundamentalist sector of the economy" earns annual profits of some \$1.2 billion.

Now the BNP-Jamaat alliance is rigging the next national elections, scheduled for January, to prevent the return of the opposition Awami League to power. Voter lists are being manipulated, and the supposedly neutral caretaker government and the commission that will run the election are being turned into puppets.

The BNP argues that coalition rule helps moderates in the Jamaat to combat Islamic extremist factions. But the reality is that Jamaat inroads in the government security machinery at all levels, starting with Home Secretary Muhammad Omar Farooq, widely regarded as close to the Jamaat, have opened the way for suicide bombings, political assassinations, harassment of the Hindu minority, and an unchecked influx of funds from Islamic charities in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf to Jamaat-oriented *madrassas* (religious schools) that in some cases are fronts for terrorist activity.

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With some 15,000 hard-core fighters operating out of 19 known base camps, guerrilla groups sponsored by the Jamaat and its allies were able to paralyze the country last Aug. 17 by staging 459 closely synchronized explosions in all but one of the country's administrative districts. When the key leaders of these groups were captured, they were kept by the police in a comfortable apartment, where they were free to receive visitors. A cartoon in the Daily Star of Dhaka on July 24 showed them lounging on a rug, conducting classes in bombmaking. Their fate and present place of confinement is uncertain, and all of the major guerrilla groups are back to business as usual.

The bitterness of Bangladeshi politics is often attributed to a personal vendetta between two strong women, Prime Minister Zia and the Awami League leader, Sheikh Hasina Wajed. But the roots of the current struggle go back to 1971, when Bengali East Pakistan, led by the Awami League, broke away from Punjabi-dominated West Pakistan to form the nation of Bangladesh. The Jamaat, which originated in the western wing, opposed the independence movement and fought side by side with Pakistani forces against both fellow Bengalis and the Indian troops who intervened in the decisive final phase of the conflict.

For Pakistan's intelligence agencies, especially Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the legacy of the independence war has been a built-in network of agents within the Jamaat and its affiliates who can be utilized to harass India along its 2,500-mile border with Bangladesh. In addition to supporting tribal separatist groups in northeast India, the ISI uses Bangladesh as a base for helping Islamic extremists inside India. After the July 11 train bombings in Bombay, a top Indian police official, K.P. Raghuvanshi, said that his key suspects "have connections with groups in Nepal and Bangladesh, which are directly or indirectly connected to Pakistan."

A State Department report cited evidence that one of the Jamaat's main allies, the Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami, also headquartered in Pakistan, "maintains contact with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan." Bangladesh Harakat leader Fazlul Rahman was one of the six signatories of Osama bin Laden's first declaration of holy war against the United States, on Feb. 23, 1998. Since the October 2002 Bali bombings led to repression of al-Qaeda, some of its Indonesian and Malaysian cells have shifted their operations to Bangladesh.

What makes future prospects in Bangladesh especially alarming is that the Jamaat and its allies appear to be penetrating the higher ranks of the armed forces. Among many examples, informed journalists in Dhaka attribute Jamaat sympathies to Maj. Gen. Mohammed Aminul Karim, recently appointed as military secretary to President Iajuddin Ahmed, and to Brig. Gen. A.T.M. Amin, director of the Armed Forces Intelligence anti-terrorism bureau.

The respected journalists in question cannot write freely about the Jamaat without facing death threats or assassination attempts. The U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists has published extensive dossiers documenting 68 death threats and dozens of bombing attacks that have injured at least eight journalists. "We are alarmed by the growing pattern of intimidation of journalists by Islamic groups in Bangladesh," the committee said recently. "As a result of its alliance with the Jamaat-Islamiyah, the government appears to lack the ability or will to protect journalists from this new and grave threat."

The Bush administration has yet to speak with comparable candor. The latest State Department annual report on terrorism mentioned only one of the three Jamaat militias as a terrorist group and avoided direct criticism of the BNP for its coalition with the Jamaat, referring only to the "serious political constraints" that explain the government's "limited success" in countering "escalating" terrorist violence. On July 13 the U.S.

ambassador called Bangladesh "an exceptional moderate Muslim state."

The United States and other donors gave Bangladesh \$1.4 billion in aid last year. There is still time for the administration to use aid leverage and trade concessions to promote a fair election by calling openly and forcefully for nonpartisan control of the Election Commission and the caretaker government. In addition to implicitly threatening an aid cutoff if it is rebuffed, the administration should offer the powerful incentive of duty-free textile imports from Bangladesh if Prime Minister Zia cooperates.

In Pakistan, the United States has been gingerly pushing Gen. Pervez Musharraf for democratic elections because it needs the limited but significant support he is giving against al-Qaeda and fears what might come after him. But what is the excuse for inaction in Bangladesh, where the incumbent government coddles Islamic extremists and a strong secular party is ready to govern?

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