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VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INSURGENCY IN BANGLADESH: A RISK ASSESSMENT

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ACRONYMS

AL	Awami League
BDR	Bangladesh Rifles
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
CVE	Counter-violent Extremism
DG	Democracy and Governance
HBT	Hizbut Tahrir Bangladesh
HuJI-B	Movement of Islamic Holy War (<i>Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh</i>)
ICS	Islami Chhatra Shibir
IoM	Islam-o-Muslim
ISI-D	Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (of Pakistan)
IT	Information Technology
JI	Jamaat-i-Islami
JMB	Jamaatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh
JMJB	Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (Awake the Muslim People of Bangladesh)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RAB	Rapid Action Battalion
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing (of India)
SAH	Shahadat-e-Al-Hikma
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
VE	Violent Extremism
VE/I	Violent Extremism and Insurgency
VIE	Violent Islamic Extremism

MAP



Map No. 3711 Rev. 2 UNITED NATIONS
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bangladesh is the world's seventh most populous country and the third largest Muslim majority country. Notwithstanding staggering challenges stemming from rampant poverty, natural disasters, military coups and venal politics, the country has held four elections that were considered mainly “free and fair” and eschewed radical Islamism at a time when many hitherto moderate and traditional Islamic societies have succumbed to Violent Extremism (VE). Bangladesh's moderate Islamic and democratic credentials in the face of such daunting challenges make it a valuable example to other Islamic societies even as it challenges those who claim that Islamic societies and democracy cannot cohere. This makes it an important partner for the United States and the pro-democratic world. A Bangladesh that continues to improve along these lines stands to undermine Islamists' attempt to make the country a stronghold for their ilk who ultimately envision creating a renewed *Khilafat*.

Bangladesh has seen a dramatic rise and then drop in Violent Islamist Extremism (VIE) during the past decade. While the overall rise in VIE is mainly associated with the post-1999 spread of Islamist militancy, its fortunes have also been correlated with political power—as represented by the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP)—in the country. While the military-led caretaker regime may not have cracked down fully on some Islamist extremists, its superintendence between 2007 and 2008 and the AL's counterterrorism efforts have forced many Islamist radicals to go underground. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, no fatalities related to Islamist violence were documented in 2010 and 2011.

Bangladeshis are known for practicing a tolerant Islam that combines Bengali traditions with Islamic values. Islamists denigrate these practices as Hindu-inspired and seek to superimpose their version of a uniform and monolithic Islam that is alien to Bangladesh's socio-cultural history. Islamists have underestimated the extent to which Bangladeshis value both their Bengali and Islamic identities, and this may be a major reason that Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and other Islamist parties have failed to garner more traction, as evidenced by their inability to capture more than 10 percent of electoral support.

There nevertheless are overlapping areas of concern associated with this turnaround. First, the crackdown against Islamists and other destabilizing elements that the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), comprising of military, paramilitary, and police forces, has spearheaded utilizes extra-judicial and extra-constitutional procedures that have undermined civil liberties and fundamental human rights.¹ The rapes, torture, and disappearances associated with the RAB, which has targeted various societal groups, including BNP supporters, has exacerbated a culture of impunity and the country's law and order problems.² The best salve for Bangladesh's violent democracy is transparent and accountable governance and the crackdown, while commendable for the dramatic turnaround it generated, comes at the expense of such.

Second, the culture of vengeance the AL and BNP are embroiled in ends up downplaying the Islamist threat facing Bangladesh by projecting it as part and parcel of Bangladeshi politics. This is hardly the case, but Sheikh Hasina's and Khalida Zia's antipathy for each other has allowed Islamists to take advantage of inter-party rivalry to try to further their agenda.

Third, the JI's longstanding goal has been to make Bangladesh an Islamist state via peaceful means—although it maintains links and sympathizes with (and even supports) groups resorting to VIE to attain the same goal expeditiously. The JI has been decapitated, and many of its leaders could be sentenced to death for crimes they committed during the 1971 War of Independence. This could force the group to downplay its Islamist aspirations and focus more on being a traditional political party. On the other hand, the chaos that the AL's

¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung Index 2012, Bangladesh Country Report, pp. 8-9. Also see U. S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011: Bangladesh” and Human Rights Watch, *Judge, Jury, and Executioner*.

² Telephone interview with Ali Riaz, Professor of Political Science, Illinois State University, September 24, 2012.

and BNP's politics of revenge perpetuates combined with other calamities (be they natural disasters or a wrecked economy) could conceivably create opportunities for a party such as JI to burnish its image and inch its way toward greater influence.

Fourth, a sense of complacency resulting from the hitherto successful crackdown coupled with sympathy for the Islamists among some personnel within the bureaucracy and military have led to selective arrests of those associated with VIE. This has enabled certain extremists to step out of the limelight but wait for a more propitious time to regroup. The extant sympathy for Islamists among some within state institutions coincides with a Bangladeshi society that is now much more Islamic. This burgeoning Islamization coupled with the security forces' inconsistency when targeting extremist elements creates conditions and provides opportunities for VIE. Related to this, it appears that various persons accused of various infractions have been caught in the RAB's dragnet and indiscriminately incarcerated with Islamist extremists, thus providing fertile conditions for these persecuted elements to be recruited and deployed toward militancy upon their release from prison.

Besides seeking to tackle the Islamist threat, the AL has also cracked down on the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which in turn has pushed the group to engage in peace talks with India. The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord has also effectively ended the insurgency in that once restive region, although it behooves the government to put an end to the rapes, torture, and land grabbing facing indigenous people there.

All this makes Bangladesh a more stable country when compared to the early 2000s. However, while the threat from VIE is much reduced, Islamists' resilience, the sympathy they enjoy among some in the military, bureaucracy, and educational sector, complacency within the security establishment and government, and gross malgovernance could combine to fuel a revival of VIE. Recent media reports discuss militant groups regrouping and arms caches being uncovered, which partly highlight the tenuous nature of Bangladesh's crackdown against Islamists. Renewed militancy and Islamist violence is especially likely if a BNP-JI led coalition displaced the AL in the next election or if the AL loses legitimacy by failing to conduct free and fair elections.

USAID Bangladesh's current CDCS for FY 2011-2016 doesn't appear to recognize VE/I as a potentially recurring problem in Bangladesh. This report suggests that VE/I should be viewed as a phenomenon that is currently in remission but that could reemerge due to a variety of factors. Therefore, the principal implications for USAID programming are:

- 1) USAID should recognize that VE/I will remain a low level risk but, under certain circumstances, could become a serious problem again.
- 2) Therefore, USAID should look for opportunities to use existing USAID programs to further bolster the gains made against VE/I over the last five years.
- 3) USAID should ensure that the capacity to monitor and address VE/I continues to exist in Bangladesh.

Summary Assessment of VEI in Bangladesh

Key issues	Overall assessment	Explanatory note
1. Current level of VEI activity	Low	VEI has declined following a dramatic rise from 1999 to 2006. The decline is attributable to repression, reduced elite-level political support for Islamists and pushback against the Islamists' agenda by civil society groups and the public.
2. Overall capacity of state and society to respond to VEI	Moderate/varies	Government response depends on elite politics. The Rapid Action Battalion has, in the main, demonstrated its ability to decimate militant Islamist groups. Bengali traditions offer a partial bulwark against Islamist agendas.
3. Likely trajectory of VEI over next 3-5 years	Islamist agendas likely to be pursued through both democratic and non-democratic means. A major resurgence in VEI is unlikely but possible.	The ability of Islamist extremists to make a comeback will depend on elite-level politics, the quality of democratic politics and the resilience and adaptability of Islamist groups. Death penalty verdicts in the ongoing war crimes trials that have mainly targeted JI leaders could spark a violent Islamist reaction. Electoral defeat for the AL could also lead to conditions favoring Islamists' resurgence.
4. Nature of the threat posed by VEI	The principal threats posed by VEI include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low level violence - Human rights violations, especially against minorities and secular forces - Increased political polarization - Potential radicalization of a hitherto tolerant Islamic Bangladeshi polity - Diffusion of VEI into neighboring South Asian states 	These potential threats feed off each other and thus a resurgence of VEI could see a rise in all these areas.
5. Implications for USAID's strategy/programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watch for a possible resurgence in VEI - Support improvements in the quality of democracy (e.g.: anti-corruption, human rights and access to justice) - Support efforts to strengthen pluralism and tolerance. 	

I. INTRODUCTION

This report draws on published sources to assess the current and prospective risk of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Bangladesh. It does not attempt to offer an in-depth analysis of VE/I in Bangladesh, but rather it seeks to provide an overview of key drivers, actors, and trends in order to inform the future development of USAID Bangladesh's strategy and programs. Section II provides a brief review of the interplay of religion and politics that underpins violent Islamist extremism (VIE) in Bangladesh. Section III describes the spike in VIE that occurred from 2005-2009 and the government's response to it. Sections IV and V summarize the major drivers of VE/I in Bangladesh and key actors, respectively. Section VI offers an assessment of current and future VE/I risk. Section VII offers observations on the implications of the analysis for USAID Bangladesh programs.

II. BACKGROUND: THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

Pakistan's discriminatory treatment of its eastern half saw the Awami League's Sheikh Mujibur-ur-Rahman lead Bangladesh to independence in 1971. Islamists, especially those associated with Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) had collaborated with Pakistan to prevent Bangladesh from seceding, and the subsequent violence killed between 1.5 and 3 million Bengalis (depending on the source).³ Bangladesh thus came into being amidst enormous violence and has long been inured to a culture of political violence.⁴

The December 1972 constitution Sheikh Rahman introduced made secularism a basic principle (together with nationalism, socialism, and democracy). But nation-building in Bangladesh has centered on Islam, the religion of the vast majority, and a Bengali identity rooted primarily in the Bengali language. While religion was used as a primary identity marker to become part of Pakistan in 1947, it was made secondary to Bengali language and culture when seceding from Pakistan and creating Bangladesh.⁵

Islam's professed egalitarian ethos (which appealed to dominated and subjugated lower caste Hindus) and the more efficient agricultural technologies that 18th century Muslim rulers invented were primary reasons for the religion's spread in what is now Bangladesh.⁶ This mainly voluntary embrace allowed Bengalis to fuse the new religion and their traditional practices, which led to a moderate and tolerant Islam that coexisted with Hinduism. This was best manifested by the extent to which Sufism was celebrated within Bangladesh. Moreover, Muslim and Hindu Bengalis value and share cultural practices rooted in song, dance, poetry, and drama.⁷ This fusion has long been anathema to those espousing a rigid and purist—i.e., Salafist—Islam.

The politics of Bangladesh since independence have to a significant degree been driven by politicizing these religious and linguistic/cultural constructs, with the AL and its allies typically promoting a Bengali identity with an avowedly secular platform and the BNP and its allies countering this with a relatively pro-Islamist stance (although the BNP claims that both Islamic and Bengali identities exist in equilibrium).

³ Mujibur Rahman initially sought to bring to justice such collaborators but various contingencies led him to issue an amnesty in 1973. The amnesty and Mujibur's assassination by mid-level army officers in August 1975 allowed many Islamists who had perpetrated crimes during the War of Independence to return, and the military rule that ensued until 1990 under Generals Zia-ur-Rahman and Hussain Mohammed Ershad prevented them from being prosecuted.

⁴ Md. Shamsul Islam, "Political Violence in Bangladesh," 2011, pp 27-45.

⁵ Philip Oldenburg, "A Place Insufficiently Imagined," pp. 711-33.

⁶ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, 1993.

⁷ Sumit Ganguly, "The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," p. 3.

Following Mujibur Rahman's assassination and numerous coups, General Zia-ur-Rahman took over as Bangladesh's strongman. Zia, who formed the BNP, was in turn assassinated in September 1978, but he and fellow military strongman General Ershad, seeking to legitimize their rule, embraced policies that promoted a more Islamist society, which emboldened and strengthened JI and other Islamic groups. For instance, General Zia added an Islamic preamble to the constitution in 1977, while General Ershad introduced the 8th Amendment to the constitution that made Islam the state's official religion in 1988. Both generals also marginalized minorities from being promoted within the police, armed forces, and bureaucracy so as to appease Islamists.⁸

If Generals Zia and Ershad's policies are most responsible for the rise of JI and other Islamists in Bangladesh,⁹ the jihadi groups who fought in Afghanistan were a major reason for the introduction of violent Islamist extremism (VIE) in Bangladesh.¹⁰ A decreased passion for Bengali nationalism following two decades of independence, the failure of socialism especially in light of the Soviet Union's implosion, and governmental malfeasance and malpractice within the context of liberal democracy appear to have combined to make Islamism the only meaningful ideology for many Bangladeshis.¹¹

In the post-authoritarian era, both the AL and BNP have cared more about acquiring and maintaining political power than promoting secularism or Islamism, respectively.¹² The AL is not without its Islamist sympathizers.¹³ Consequently, the AL has at times not shied away from seeking an alliance with Islamists (despite the country's post-independence political dynamics pitting the Islamists against AI).¹⁴ The BNP, on the other hand, has allied with Islamists mainly because it has lacked better options when seeking to form a government. The BNP's stance has allowed it to distinguish itself from the AL even though it has permitted Islamists to broaden their constituency, but both parties' opportunism has implications for Bangladesh's prospects.

III. THE RISE IN VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM AND THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

Between 1999 and 2005 the country was racked by hitherto unprecedented violence perpetrated mainly by radical Islamists, causing widespread fears that Bangladesh was on the cusp of becoming a failed state and a bastion for jihadist forces with links to Al Qaeda and similar outfits bent on perpetrating global jihad.¹⁵ The country experienced its first ever Islamist terrorist attack in March 1999 when a bomb detonated at a concert killed 15 people. Such attacks proliferated after the BNP and the JI came to power in 2001.¹⁶ Many Sufi shrines and places of worship were destroyed during the early 2000s when radical Islamists ran amuck thanks to the cover their JI patrons in government afforded them, and Islamists also targeted the minuscule and besieged Ahmadiyya community. In August 2004, a well-coordinated grenade attack nearly decimated the Awami League leadership.

⁸ Tariq Karim, *Bangladesh: The New Front-Line State*, p. 147.

⁹ Ali Riaz, *God Willing*, 18.

¹⁰ Ali Riaz and Jessica Bastian, "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," pp. 153-4.

¹¹ Maneeza Hossain, *Broken Pendulum*, p. 14.

¹² The BNP ruled from 1991 to 1995 and from 2001 to 2006, while the AL ruled from 1996 to 2001 and has run the present government since January 2009.

¹³ Telephone interview with Ali Riaz, Professor of Political Science, Illinois State University, September 24, 2012.

¹⁴ And its avowed commitment to secularism notwithstanding, the AL retained Islam as the state religion when passing the 15th Amendment to the constitution in June 2012 (much to the consternation and chagrin of Bangladeshi liberals). The AL under Sheikh Hasina has also made clear it is not interested in banning Islamic parties.

¹⁵ Hiranmay Karlekar, *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?*

¹⁶ Jalal Alamgir, "Bangladesh's Fresh Start," p. 45.

Elements within the BNP provided cover for those perpetrating VIE. This is in part because VIE groups oppose the AL but it is also because many in the BNP share the Islamists' ideology. The BNP and JI refused to acknowledge that there were VIE groups in Bangladesh until 2005 when over 400 bombs went off simultaneously in all but one of the country's 64 districts, the handiwork of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). This is despite some accounts claiming that 50,000 Islamist militants representing 40 groups may have been operating in Bangladesh (with help from JI and some elements within the BNP) in the mid-2000s.¹⁷ Only then did the Zia government (goaded by the international community) begin to address the problem of VIE.

The crackdown against VIE in Bangladesh began in 2005 and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which was created in March 2004, spearheaded the assault. The force was set up to tackle all crime and it remains very popular among the country's population—despite its record of excess and abuse. It has been responsible for numerous “crossfires,” a term made popular to denote individuals the RAB have murdered, and the outfit has also been accused of carrying out politically motivated killings.¹⁸ According to Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake, “There continue to be credible reports that Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (or RAB), a paramilitary law enforcement group made up of policemen and Army soldiers, is involved with some extrajudicial killings and disappearances.”¹⁹

In January 2007 an interim government was installed by the military. It put in place an updated Money Laundering Prevention Ordinance and an Anti-Terrorism Ordinance in 2008. Following the December 2008 elections the AL returned to power in January 2009. The AL government passed the Terrorism Prevention Act and an Amended Terrorism Prevention Act in 2011.²⁰ The AL had lacked political clout when it ruled between 1996-2001 to prosecute Islamists and others most responsible for war crimes during the War of Independence, but the thumping majority it currently enjoys has emboldened it to go after both hard-core Islamists and war criminals. While the public supports the war crimes trials, there have been concerns expressed about procedure.

The government augmented these repressive measures with a ‘soft’ counter-extremism strategy. This approach has been described as a hybrid between counter- and de-radicalization programs because, although it relied on group profiling, its target group was a mixture of those who had already become radicalized as well as vulnerable individuals who were susceptible to violent extremist ideology. One of the program's key objectives was to promote a more moderate version of Islam and expose violent extremist ideologies as misconceived. The program targets areas historically susceptible to VE and employs methods such as: conducting seminars and workshops especially among madrassa students, thereby highlighting Islam as a religion of peace even while denigrating VIE; using community leaders and religious figures to do likewise; promoting modern education by privileging the teaching of English and information technology (IT); helping participants attain higher education; providing those who are unemployed financial assistance; and educating the children of those imprisoned.²¹ Furthermore, it has sought to reform primary and secondary education in ways that bolster a more secular identity.²²

The AL, as part of its attempts to counter the Islamists, has also tried to reinforce the country's Bengali identity by stating in the 15th Amendment to the constitution that the country's people are Bangladeshi

¹⁷ Harsh V. Pant, “India and Bangladesh,” p. 238-9.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Judge, Jury, and Executioner*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Congressional testimony, July 19, 2012.

²⁰ Within the government, inter-agency coordination to combat violent extremism was bolstered by the National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention (NCMRP), the establishment of Combined Threat Assessment Centre (CTAC) under the National Security Intelligence (NSI), Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) of Bangladesh Bank and the National Committee for Intelligence Coordination (NCIC), headed by Prime Minister.

²¹ International Peace Institute, *A New Approach*, p. 4.

²² Telephone interview with Ali Riaz, Professor, Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University, September 24, 2012.

citizens who represent a Bengali nation. The AL has also sought to promote various cultural programs to counter the Islamists.²³

Rulings by recent Bangladeshi courts have ostensibly strengthened the country's secular credentials and dealt a blow to Islamist aspirations. For instance, in February 2010 the Supreme Court upheld a 2005 High Court verdict that declared the 5th Amendment—which legalized military rule and discarded secularism—illegal. And in August 2010 the High Court ruled that the 7th Amendment, which also legitimized military rule, to be unconstitutional.²⁴ That same month, the High Court banned *fatwas*, which Islamists in especially rural areas were using to administer cruel and humiliating punishments (usually on women). In April 2010 the High Court ruled that women working in public and private educational settings could not be forced to wear veils or cover their heads. And in August 2010 the same court declared that forcing women to wear the *burqa* was illegal.²⁵

Bangladesh has long had a vibrant civil society that predates the numerous NGOs that have sprouted in the country during the past two to three decades. This civil society played a major role clamoring for accountability following the War of Independence and has done likewise in countering Islamists' attempts to radicalize the country. They have rebelled against the forced Islamization of their society by organizing Bengali book fairs and cultural events.²⁶ After 2005, the government deliberately facilitated the setting up of new NGOs to help implement the country's de-radicalisation program. It was felt that NGOs provided an ideal vehicle for delivering the government's counter-violent extremism agenda as they were well embedded in society and their work was well understood and appreciated at a local level.²⁷

This multifaceted counterattack appears to have disrupted the extremists. The crackdown has also heartened India, which is convinced that Pakistan's ISI has linked up some militants to target India.²⁸ Indian sources especially are prone to resort to hyperbole when discussing links between Bangladeshi militant outfits and terrorist groups operating in Pakistan or Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI-D).²⁹ This noted, it appears that elements within the ISI have indeed provided Indian separatist groups weapons via Bangladesh (while India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) may have done likewise to support groups in Myanmar).³⁰

While all these efforts have no doubt contributed to the regress in VIE, the fact remains that Bangladesh's "soft counterterrorism measures are reinforced by its parallel iron-fisted approach to terrorism, and that it is hard to disaggregate the efforts of hard versus soft measures."³¹ Another concern is that much of Bangladesh's actions vis-à-vis VIE has been reactive, as opposed to being preventive.³²

IV. DRIVERS OF VE/I

Various interpenetrating social maladies and extraneous influences contribute to VE/I in Bangladesh and trying to rank order them is of dubious utility. What can be said with confidence is that the following issues have had and continue to have salience when it comes to driving VE/I.

²³Maneeza Hossain, *Broken Pendulum*, p. 23.

²⁴Bina D'Costa, "Bangladesh in 2010," p. 139.

²⁵Moinul Khan, "Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh," pp. 59-60.

²⁶Nazib Wadood, "Countering Terrorism," p. 118.

²⁷Hamed El-Said, "De-Radicalising Islamists: Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States," January 2012.

²⁸Harsh V. Pant, "India and Bangladesh," p. 243.

²⁹This is a point noted by Sumit Ganguly, p. 2. One Indian journalist told an author of this report that nearly 40 percent of Bangladesh's military sympathized with Islamists. When this number was mentioned to a Bangladeshi scholar, he retorted that if this indeed was the case the jihadists would have already taken over Bangladesh.

³⁰See Riaz and Bastian 2011, pp. 156-7.

³¹International Peace Institute, *A New Approach*, p. 4.

³²Naureen Chowdhury Fink, *Bombs and Ballots*, p. 1.

Poverty. Poverty alone does not breed VE but poverty seen to be perpetrated by unmitigated corruption, lack of law and order, and impunity can inspire the dispossessed to try and transform their lot via violence. As a Bangladeshi military personnel aptly notes, “religious extremism that metamorphoses into militancy thrives in ignorance, backwardness, joblessness and poverty,”³³ and mitigating this is crucial when seeking to tame VE.

Poverty also provides Islamists the opportunity to provide mundane services that burnish their image even as it delegitimizes government. Thus while JI is also known to improperly acquire government resources,³⁴ it usually channels such resources toward its constituencies, thereby generating a cleaner image and performing superior public services than the AL and BNP.³⁵ JI also operates like a state within a state by providing education services through its madrasas, economic services through Islamic banks, and medical services through its hospitals.³⁶ Such services causes those mired in poverty to take a shine to the JI and fellow Islamists.

Finally, about 70% of the nearly 160 million people in Bangladesh are under the age of 35.³⁷ Combined with the country’s low state capacity, this also means that Bangladesh is currently dealing with a forbidding youth bulge. While Bangladesh’s general economic conditions have improved over the past two decades, it remains a poverty-stricken country and this can operate as an important driver of extremism.

Corruption, and law and order problems: Bangladesh was ranked the most corrupt country in the world between 2001 and 2005. While it has improved its ranking considerably since then,³⁸ average Bangladeshis resent how bureaucrats and government officials swindle the state and how a culture of impunity disallows citizens from seeking redress to legitimate grievances. While monocausal explanations that link corruption or the absence of law and order with extremism is unwarranted, various sources suggest that police injustice, oppression, and lack of trust in government can contribute to youth being recruited into extremist movements.³⁹

Political animus between the AL and BNP: The revenge politics between the AL and BNP continues, notwithstanding Bangladeshis expressing their distress over it. The Hasina government has been keen to highlight militant involvement in Bangladeshi society so as to justify the RAB’s crackdown against them and also link these militants to the BNP (which the prime minister claims continues to support militant outfits).⁴⁰ It is hardly news that many in the BNP have relations with Islamists, but some of the charges leveled at the party’s personnel are clearly politically motivated. And it does not bode well that Khalida Zia recently warned those working against the BNP that they would be dealt with when the party returns to power.

All political parties seek to perpetuate their reign, but the fear of dealing with a victorious and vengeful opposition is a major reason both the BNP and the AL have sought to continue in power via unfair elections. Furthermore, both the AL and BNP are notorious for taking their disagreement on to the streets, and the tendency to do so constitutes a major driver of political violence in the country.

Middle East influences. While Bangladeshis living abroad, especially in the United Kingdom, have strengthened Islamists, the Middle East plays an important role in driving Islamic radicalism within Bangladesh. The Middle East influence is twofold: money pouring in that supports Islamists and

³³ Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, “Role of Education,” p. 119.

³⁴ It is instructive that many JI leaders’ children are educated in the West, especially the United Kingdom where the JI enjoys significant support among the Bangladeshi community there.

³⁵ Maneeza Hossain, *Broken Pendulum*, pp. 17-8.

³⁶ Maneeza Hossain, *Broken Pendulum*, p. 25.

³⁷ *The Economist*, “That’s Not the Way to Do It,” June 10, 2010.

³⁸ Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index ranked Bangladesh 120 out of 183 states. See <http://www.transparency.org/country#BGD>.

³⁹ See, for instance, Nazib Wadood, “Countering Terrorism,” pp. 63-75.

⁴⁰ *Daily Star*, “Main Opposition Partonises Militants,” January 11, 2012.

Bangladeshis returning from working in the region having adopted Salafist and Wahabist teachings. There is no doubt that money continues to pour in from Middle Eastern states like Saudi Arabia to fund the affairs of the Islamists, and recent reports also claim that Islamic banks within Bangladesh may be financing Islamists' activities.⁴¹ Middle Eastern returnees who have inculcated rigid and austere Islamic teachings can be counted on to sympathize with Islamism. Most of these persons would have performed Hajj, and this combined with their relative upward mobility thanks to Middle East employment are bound to provide them respectable and influential positions within their communities.

Violence against Muslims in India in general and along India-Bangladesh border in particular.

Islamists react viscerally toward India and they accuse the AL of sacrificing the country's sovereignty to pander to Indian interests. VIE groups operating in Bangladesh have infiltrated India and the August 2007 bombings in Hyderabad, for instance, are attributed to Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B). VIE groups also use the tensions stemming from illegal Bangladeshi migration into India's northeast to fan anti-Hindu and –Indian sentiments within Bangladesh. Such tactics are especially effective whenever there are anti-Muslim riots in India or when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in power, given that party's general antipathy towards Muslims within India and throughout South Asia.⁴²

India has, with justification, claimed that Bangladeshi elements support anti-Indian insurgent and terrorist groups that train in Bangladesh. This was especially true of ULFA, which India considers a terrorist outfit. But the increased cooperation between the Indian government and AL has led to Bangladesh cracking down on ULFA. This is considered a major reason for the group agreeing to engage in peace talks with the Indian government. This positive development, however, could change if and when the pro-India AL loses power. The situation is bound to be especially dicey if a BJP government in India and a BNP government in Bangladesh ruled simultaneously.

Plight of Rohingya refugees: The Rohingyas are Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine (formerly Arakan) state. The Rohingya Solidarity Organization seeks to create a separate state for Rohingyas in Arakan state and operates both in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Stripped of citizenship and heavily persecuted by Myanmar's military government, an estimated 500,000 Rohingyas may have crossed into Bangladesh to live as refugees. Of these, only 30,000 are registered with the Bangladesh government.⁴³ The Rohingya's plight makes them easy prey for Islamists, and it appears that the Kashmir separatist group Jaish-e-Mohammed is involved in trying to recruit Rohingyas for its activities in Bangladesh,⁴⁴ although such persons will also find it easier to cross into India. HuJI-B too has had close ties to the Rohingyas.⁴⁵

Plight of Biharis. There are about 300,000 Biharis, or Pakistanis left behind when Bangladesh became independent, who are currently considered refugees, and Islamist extremists have sought to recruit cadre from among them as well. The Biharis are Muslims who migrated from India's state of Bihar to East Pakistan after Partition. Excepting religion, they have almost nothing in common with Bengalis and in 1971 they supported the Pakistan military over Bengali nationalists. Caught between the politics of Bangladesh and Pakistan and the opportunism of Islamist extremists, the step motherly treatment the Biharis are currently subjected to could make them susceptible to being radicalized.

Minorities: Like most groups looking for ways to mobilize and expand their bases, Islamists too grasp at whatever they can to bolster their numbers and clout. While the Hindu community has long been a convenient scapegoat in this attempt, so have the Sufis and Ahmadiyyas. Radical Sunnis especially loathe the latter and campaigned successfully to have Ahmadi publications banned in 2004. They blatantly attacked the community and its mosques in the early 2000s and came close to having the Ahmadiyyas branded non-

⁴¹ *Daily Star*, "Islami Bank Spends 8pc Profit on Militancy," March 1, 2011.

⁴² Sinderpal Singh, "Border Crossings and Islamic Terrorists."

⁴³ *Daily Star*, "Face Rohingya Issue Upfront," September 24, 2012.

⁴⁴ *Daily Star*, "Suspected Militant Leader Captured," August 17, 2012.

⁴⁵ Ali Riaz and Jessica Bastian, "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," p. 158.

Muslims (as in Pakistan). Attacks against Sufis and Ahmadiyyas have ceased under the AL government, but this means the Islamists are able to equate their hatred for the AL with their disgust for so-called un-Islamic minorities when mobilizing.

V. KEY ACTORS

The AL and BNP, which command nearly 90 percent of the vote between them, are Bangladesh's biggest actors with regard to the future of VE/I. But extremist elements headed by the Islamists, given their proven ability to destabilize the country, will continue to play significant roles in determining the country's future trajectory. It is important to recognize that not all Islamist groups in Bangladesh are extremist. While they may all prefer to see Bangladesh adopt Sharia law, some like JI seek to capture power through the ballot box while others seek to infiltrate institutions and undermine the state while the most radical resort to violence and terrorism.⁴⁶

Notwithstanding its stated goal of wanting to make Bangladesh an Islamic state, *Jamaat-i-Islami (JI)* has hitherto eschewed violence and participated in the democratic process.⁴⁷ It is in many ways a pragmatic party, and it does command significant support among the country's urban, well-educated, middle classes.⁴⁸ Seeking to broaden its base, the JI amended its constitution in the lead up to the 2008 elections, acknowledging that the 1971 war was one of liberation, officially swapping *Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh* to *Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami*, and permitting non-Muslims to join the party. It made no difference, as the party went from 17 seats to winning just two. However, the JI shares nearly all the goals VIE groups espouse, it shielded many violent Islamists while in alliance with the BNP, and it adamantly refused to acknowledge that VIE operated in Bangladesh until the 2005 bombings. The JI would be thrilled if militant jihadi groups ended up creating an Islamic state. Indeed, the JI's "moderate" Islamism, while clamoring for a Sharia-based Bangladesh, is what created the conditions that VIE has exploited. This indictment could also be leveled at other Islamist political parties such as *Islami Oikya Jote* (United Islamic Front), which has also allied with the BNP.

Some journalistic accounts refer to the *Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS)*, which is the JI's student wing, in terrorist terms. This no doubt is partly due to all those arrested in the 2005 bombings having been a part of JI or ICS.⁴⁹ The ICS, however, is better characterized as a violence-prone student organization that is determined to Islamize the education curriculum as a precursor to creating an Islamic state.

Bangladesh has numerous groups that resort to VIE, and it appears that they coordinate their activities quite extensively. In August 2005 a *Daily Star* investigation revealed that since 1989 over 30 Islamist militant outfits comprising of cadres who had fought in Afghanistan and Palestine (and also trained in Libya) had dispersed throughout Bangladesh.⁵⁰ It is estimated that around 3,400 Bangladeshis fought with the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan against the Soviets. While most returned to Bangladesh and apparently joined local Islamist networks, there seems to be little accurate information on the size of most groups, and keeping track of some of them tends to be difficult given how they coalesce and splinter while their leaders sometimes rebrand outfits and also maintain membership in multiple outfits. According to media reports, 15 militant groups were said to be operating in Bangladesh in 2010.⁵¹ A recent report in the *Daily Star* noted that there were 15

⁴⁶ Jeremie Codron, "The Islamist Militias of Bangladesh," p. 182.

⁴⁷ The patience JI exhibits when it comes to securing its ultimate goal of an Islamic state in Bangladesh is akin to the role the Islamic Brotherhood has played in Egypt.

⁴⁸ Elora Shehabuddin, "Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh," p. 590.

⁴⁹ Anand Kumar, "Jamaat and its Agenda of Islamic State in Bangladesh," p. 545.

⁵⁰ Ziyadul Ahsan, "Inside the Militant Groups—1," *Daily Star*, August 21, 2005.

⁵¹ Shahedul Anam Khan, "Militants Outfits in Bangladesh," *Daily Star*, April 1, 2010.

“foreign militant groups” operating in Bangladesh, and it is likely the newspaper was referring to the same ones as in its 2010 report.⁵²

In recent years militants have avidly promoted themselves using websites, so that by one count there now exist at least 4,000 militant websites while there were only around 20 such sites 15 years ago.⁵³ The militants know what they are doing: much radicalization today takes place via the internet.⁵⁴ This also means that the internet is replete with information on militant organizations—information that is sometimes contradictory and also of dubious provenance. With this in mind, we briefly note below six prominent militant outfits (all of Islamist orientation).⁵⁵ Five of the six groups have been banned by the Bangladeshi government, although this has not prevented the cadre of several of them from continuing to be active.⁵⁶

- ***Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh*** (Movement of Islamic Holy War, or HuJI-B): Was formed in 1980 by Mujahedeen who fought against Soviets in Afghanistan. HuJI-B aims to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh by waging war and killing progressive intellectuals. It draws inspiration from bin Laden and the erstwhile Taliban regime of Afghanistan. At one point of time, the group issued a slogan, *Amra Sobai Hobo Taliban, Bangla Hobe Afghanistan* (We will all become Taliban and we will turn Bangladesh into Afghanistan). The HuJI-B enjoyed the patronage of mainstream political parties such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami. The government, under pressure from the international community, banned the HuJI-B in October 2005.
- ***Jamaatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh*** (Party of the Mujahedeen, or JMB): The JMB opposes secularism, considers democracy to be un-Islamic, and seeks to violently install an Islamic state. It opposes activities that promote Bengali identity and hence targeted cultural events. It also targeted minorities, NGOs, and members of the courts who championed secularism. It enjoys strong ties with Pakistan’s Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United Kingdom.⁵⁷ The JMB was proscribed by the Government in February 2005. In September 2012 Bangladeshi authorities identified a small militant group named Jamaatul Arakan, which is thought to be an offshoot of JMB.⁵⁸
- ***Islam-o-Muslim*** (IoM). According to Jane’s, IoM is a relatively new offshoot of JMB. It was founded sometime in April 2009 by two dissident JMB militants. The group reportedly emerged following an internal feud among the JMB leadership over financial and ideological matters, and is one of several splinter groups to have broken away from the JMB following the arrest and execution of the JMB’s original leadership. Although the precise objectives of the IoM have not yet been established, it is likely that the group has similar aims to its predecessor group, the JMB - namely, the establishment of an Islamic state in Bangladesh and the implementation of sharia (Islamic law). It has sought to procure weaponry for a renewed campaign, and to recruit both active and dormant members of the JMB and its affiliated youth-wing, the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). It has sought to further this immediate objective by creating a free zone - a Muktanchal, or Independent Land - in which the IoM can build its capabilities and establish itself as a credible sub-state force.
- ***Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh*** (Awake the Muslim People of Bangladesh, or JMJB): The JMJB is an offshoot of the JMB and consisting of those who waged war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The JMJB follows the ideals of the Taliban militia and propagates a movement based on

⁵² *Daily Star*, “Suspected Militant Leader Captured,” August 17, 2012.

⁵³ *Daily Star*, “Websites Now means of Communication for Militants,” January 17, 2012.

⁵⁴ International Peace Institute, “A New Approach,” p. 2.

⁵⁵ The scholarship we have especially relied on are Ali Riaz and Kh. Ali Ar Raji, “Who are the Islamists?”; Zayadul Ashan and Pavitra Banavar, “Who are the Militants?”; Ali Riaz and Jessica Bastian, “Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh”; Jeremie Codron, “The Islamist Militias of Bangladesh”; Maneeza Hossain and Lisa Curtis, *Bangladesh: Checking Islamist Extremism in a Pivotal Democracy*; and the South Asia Terrorism Portal at <http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/bangladesh/terroristoutfits/index.html>.

⁵⁶ Jalal Alamgir, “Bangladesh’s Fresh Start,” p. 43.

⁵⁷ International Crisis Group, *The Threat from Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh*.

⁵⁸ *Daily Star*, “Special Drive On to Nap Jamaatul Arakan Activists,” September 7, 2012.

Jihad. The professed long-term goal of the outfit is to usher in an ‘Islamic revolution’ in Bangladesh through *Jihad*. It was banned in February 2005. According to SATP, the activities of the outfit appear to have stopped completely by mid- 2005.

- ***Hizbut Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB)***: Hizbut Tehrir Bangladesh is part of the global Sunni movement that aspires to establish *Khilafat* by uniting all Islamic countries. Like its counterparts worldwide it wants to establish sharia in Bangladesh. The HTB is the only Islamist organization to speak of the *Khilafat*, and to acknowledge its international connection. Interestingly, the HTB “has been gaining most momentum through its activities at the country’s universities.” What makes the HTB distinctly different from other Islamist political organizations, including the clandestine ones, is that its political agenda is global, not confined to Bangladesh. The final stage of the three-stage revolution envisioned by the HTB, according to the organization’s documents, is: “establishing government, implementing Islam generally and comprehensively, and carrying it as a message to the world.” HTB was banned in October 2009 despite not been linked directly to any terrorism in Bangladesh. Its supposed support for the mutiny by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and the fact that it is banned in nearly 20 other countries appear to have influenced the government’s proscription of the group.
- ***Shahadat-e-Al-Hikma (SAH)***: SAH has renounced the liberation war of 1971 and the constitution and stated its objective of attaining state power through violent means. The group was banned in February 2003 by the then BNP- JI government. It does not appear to be active.

While some Islamist groups in Bangladesh enjoy transnational ties, especially with radicals in Pakistan and Afghanistan, VIE in the country is mainly a provincial phenomenon in that the groups there do not seek to perpetrate global (or external) jihad. Instead, their primary goal is to overtake and thereafter impose sharia law on the state, and they have thus resorted to an “internal jihad”⁵⁹ by attacking civil society groups that especially empower women and government offices and institutions like the judiciary. Sensing that Bengali identity vitiates Islamic identity, the extremists have attacked cultural festivals. The AL, leftist parties, intellectuals, and NGOs associated with secularism and wary of Islamism have also been targets. However, Pakistan’s sectarian violence, India’s Naxalite insurgencies, and Nepal’s (until recently) Maoist movement provide ample opportunities for Islamist extremists seeking to expand their transnational operations especially within the region. Consequently, while hitherto VIE in Bangladesh has been limited to Bangladesh, this could change should the country become a secure front for VIE groups.

It appears that the Bangladesh government has successfully neutralized most of these groups. However, it may also be the case that militants of Jamatul Mujahiddin Bangladesh and Hizbut Tahrir are trying to re-group and have been storing explosives in different places across the country.

Islamist radicals are not the only reason for VE in Bangladesh. For instance, the ***Purba Banglar Communist Party***, a Maoist offshoot that is also nationalist and virulently anti-Indian and is banned in the country, has experienced a violent resurgence over the past decade. While its stated goal is to take over the state, it is mostly active along the Bangladesh-India border and does not currently pose any imminent threat to the country’s sovereignty.

Until the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace agreement was signed the ***Shanti Bahini*** also waged an insurgency supporting the rights of indigenous people in the region. While the Shanti Bahini was abolished in 1999, some elements may be able to revive the fight against the state at a future time. This is conceivable if the reported rapes, torture, and land grabbing the indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tract region are periodically subjected to become widespread.

⁵⁹ Jeremie Codron, “The Islamist Militias of Bangladesh,” p. 179.

There are many other groups that are involved in extremism and insurgency in Bangladesh. However, they do not pose any imminent threat to the state, whereas the ones noted here are dangerous in both their designs and their potential.

VI. ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT AND FUTURE VE/I RISK

The crackdown that began in 2005 has drastically affected Islamist groups' operational capabilities. As per the South Asia Terrorism Portal Bangladesh Assessment for 2012, there were no fatalities associated with Islamist violence in 2010 and 2011.⁶⁰ This dramatic turnaround serves to highlight two interrelated and important points: First, whatever success Islamists and jihadists enjoyed during 1999-2005 was mainly because those governing Bangladesh at the time lacked the political will to halt their illegal operations. Second, while the extent to which Islamists and their sympathizers may have infiltrated government institutions and the military is unclear, Islamists continue to lack widespread grassroots support, a fact reinforced by the JI managing to win just two seats in the 2008 elections.

Still, the arms caches that the RAB frequently unearths makes clear that the Bangladeshi state continues to face a VIE threat. Furthermore, over 1,800 BDR personnel are said to have absconded since the outfit mutinied in February 2009, and this could have negative consequences provided they are Islamist sympathizers.⁶¹ A variety of other factors will determine the risk of VE/I going forward. These include:

The extent of support for Islamist goals. While most Muslim Bangladeshis would condemn the use of terrorism, many may still support elements of an Islamist political agenda. According to one analyst, "Presently, a major reservation among people towards the JI derives from the allegation that their top leaders were involved in crimes against humanity during the war and opposed the country at its birth. Once its leadership has been transferred to younger generations who were not born during the 1971 war, it will become harder to label them as the party which opposed the liberation force and their support base will continue to expand - many teachers and students in a public university already covertly donate funds to the JI student wing.⁶² At the same time the HTB is rapidly gaining popularity amongst urban youth and in the military, even if it is banned by the government."⁶³

Islamists in the military. The military announced in January 2012 that it foiled a coup led by mid-level officers and retired officers who were seeking to create an Islamic state. At the most, this may evidence an ideologically committed Islamist clique within the military establishment. In the least, it may reflect disgruntlement stemming from suspected Islamic sympathizers and those hostile to the AL being purged. The International Crisis Group has suggested that the military could have implicated Islamists in the coup to mask discontent among officers angry over the BDR mutiny.⁶⁴

Most analysts agree that a coup is not in the offing because the generals know the international community strongly opposes military rule and because such an eventuality could cause the country to lose its lucrative peacekeeping contracts with the United Nations. The military leadership is also averse to being blamed for maladministration, an easy charge to make given Bangladesh's many socio-economic deficits. It thus appears to have reconciled to coexisting with the begums provided its interests are protected, although this does not mean the military is fully committed to democratic and parliamentary institutions.⁶⁵ The AL likewise appears

⁶⁰ See <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/>.

⁶¹ Ryan Clarke, *Lashkar-i-Taiba*, p. 65.

⁶² <http://www.prothom-alo.com/detail/date/2012-01-21/news/218189>

⁶³ Mubashar Hasan, "Global Political Islam in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Future," *Opendemocracy.net*, April 1, 2012.

⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, *Bangladesh: Back to the Future*, p. 14 (fn. 113).

⁶⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung Index 2012. *Bangladesh Country Report*.

to work consciously to keep the generals happy,⁶⁶ although the purging of suspected Islamist sympathizers within the military has left some in the forces restive and hostile towards the AL.⁶⁷ This hostility is also related to how the AL has politicized military promotions and recruitment to unprecedented levels⁶⁸ and to the government negotiating a peaceful end to the February 2009 BDR mutiny, which prevented the military avenging the murder of 58 officers killed in gruesome fashion.⁶⁹

Elections. In June 2012 the AL introduced the 15th Amendment and it most prominently abolished the caretaker system overseeing elections. Caretaker governments are a major reason for Bangladesh conducting relatively free and fair elections, and the amendment, which empowers the incumbent cabinet to oversee elections, is troubling.⁷⁰ The BNP-led 18 party opposition alliance has threatened to boycott the election, unleash massive protests and bring the country to a halt if the caretaker system is not reintroduced. The AL, however, is unlikely to reverse course because the policy was mandated through a constitutional amendment and because it followed a Supreme Court ruling that declared the caretaker government system to be unconstitutional (although the court also ruled that the system ought to be maintained for two more elections).

The upshot is that how future elections are conducted in Bangladesh will impact not just the country's democratic prospects but also the Islamists' prospects. Consecutive wins for the AL (or its coalition) through elections that are relatively free and fair would allow the government to continue its crackdown against VIE. On the other hand, winning via unfair means would discredit the AL and victimize its opponents. Similarly, the BNP will most likely continue to ally with the JI, which would cause it to go soft on the Islamists.⁷¹ While this outcome does not mean that Bangladesh will inevitably regress to the sort of VIE it experienced in the early 2000s, the country is currently at a crucial stage and how politics unfold in the next year will determine if its near future is one of promising democracy or revived violence.

Poor governance. The AL and BNP have repeatedly mistaken their electoral victories as a license to rule in a self-serving fashion. Both the AL and BNP have tolerated rampant corruption and malgovernance in Bangladesh. During 2007-09 the caretaker government instituted a strong Anti-Corruption Commission and also reformed the Public Service Commission. Additionally, it created two magistracies that separated the judiciary and executive functions.⁷² The AL could have built on this reform to further good governance; instead it has preferred the old ways. Of particular concern with regard to the future prospects for VE/I are the government's propensity for intimidating the media and civil society organizations; filling the police force with pro-AL personnel who operate with impunity; rewarding judges who cater to the AL's preferences while others are marginalized; and tolerating violence by the AL's student wing, Bangladesh Chatra League.⁷³ The continuous decline of law and order could lead to an Islamist upswing and provide groups like JI a significant fillip. While the war crimes trials are bound to weaken JI,⁷⁴ the AL's gross maladministration could revive the party as it has the BNP.

Complacency. The hardcore Islamists are fully committed to creating an Islamic state in Bangladesh, and the fact that many among them have been able to move underground could easily lead to a revival of the violence that consumed Bangladesh in the early 2000s. It is indeed troubling that notwithstanding the crackdown on Islamists, many of their patrons in the JI and BNP, among other groups, remain unaffected.

⁶⁶ *The Economist*, "Generally Trusted," August 28, 2012.

⁶⁷ International Crisis Group, *Bangladesh: Back to the Future*, p. 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁹ Only nine of the 666 BDR personnel charged for mutinying were found not guilty. The sentences ranged from four months to seven years. See Bina D'Costa, "Bangladesh in 2011," p. 151.

⁷⁰ No government in Bangladesh has won a second term and the AL's current popularity is at dismal levels.

⁷¹ Many analysts also agree that the Islamists currently imprisoned or undergoing trials for crimes committed during the War of Independence will most likely be set free should the BNP return to power.

⁷² International Crisis Group, *Bangladesh: Back to the Future*, p. 4.

⁷³ International Crisis Group, *Bangladesh: Back to the Future*, pp. 5-8.

⁷⁴ Jalal Alamgir, "Bangladesh's Quest for Political Justice," p. 156.

Media reports that periodically claim that militant groups continue to reorganize merely accentuate this concern.

Other prospective influences of VE/I. The slated U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan coupled with a revival of the Taliban in that country could embolden VIE throughout South Asia. Bangladesh would especially be susceptible were this to coincide with the JI returning to power as part of a coalition.

The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tract Peace Accord that the government of Bangladesh stamped has put an end to the insurgency in the region. Some warn that the government's failure to implement provisions in the accord could lead to a revival of the insurgency, although such a development does not appear imminent at this stage. Finally, while some have suggested that dislocation stemming from climate change and weather related disasters could fan VE,⁷⁵ others suggest the link is overstated.⁷⁶

Conclusion. Underdevelopment, poor governance, malfunctioning institutions, and violent and partisan politics combine to create an “enabling environment” for VE in Bangladesh.⁷⁷ The subsequent mundane humiliations citizens must deal with—stemming from poverty, unsanitary conditions, corruption, nepotism, favoritism, and bureaucratic inefficiencies—can influence VE. From this standpoint, the failure of both the AL and BNP to ensure transparent, efficient, and just governance is a major contributor to the risk of VE/I in Bangladesh.

At the same time, Bangladesh is a much more religious society than in the past⁷⁸ and Bangladeshi Muslims have become more comfortable and confident when expressing their Islamic identity (as evidenced through dress and forms of speaking), and this is just as true for many among the middle and upper middle classes (which helps staff the bureaucracy and military to a significant degree).⁷⁹ As a result, Islamic values and themes have become and will continue to be an important dimension of politics in Bangladesh. This realization likely goaded the AL to retain Islam as the state religion when the 15th Amendment to the constitution was passed.

Additionally, Islam in Bangladesh does not exist in isolation of international influences. According to Ali Riaz, “The importance and influence of the Islamists in general, particularly those which represent Islam as a transnational political ideology, will depend on the domestic political environment as much as global political developments. If global politics encourages the strengthening of the sense of Muslim victimhood, due to the role of the Western countries, particularly the United States, their appeal to the common masses in Bangladesh is likely to strengthen. Bangladesh’s domestic political environment over the past two decades allowed the Islamists to consolidate their position; consequently, it opened the space for transnational Islamist groups to operate with state support. If the situation remains unchanged, the space for operation will widen further.”⁸⁰

For all these reasons, Bangladesh’s current stability, from a VE/I standpoint, is tenuous and is dependent on complex socio-political and international forces.⁸¹ VE/I could see a revival if government, religious leaders, and civil society fail to continue to deal with these challenges. Generally speaking, the less effective the

⁷⁵ Paul J. Smith, “Climate Change, Weak States,” pp. 264-84.

⁷⁶ Ben Saul, “The Security Risks of Climate Change.”

⁷⁷ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, *Bombs and Ballots*, p. 1.

⁷⁸ Imtiaz Hussain, “Fundamentalism and Bangladesh,” p. 215. As Maneeza Hossain notes, “Bangladesh’s movement toward Islam appears to be of a more lasting character than ever before in its history.” *Broken Pendulum*, p. 9.

⁷⁹ Telephone interview with Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate, Population Council, New York, September 25, 2012. However, it should be noted that men and women throughout the Muslim world have embraced more conservative Islamic garb. While this may signify greater religiosity, it would be a mistake to link such sartorial preferences with radical Islamism.

⁸⁰ Ali Riaz, *Interactions of “Transnational” and “Local” Islam in Bangladesh*, pg 99.

⁸¹ This is also the most recent conclusion by the South Asia Terrorism Portal. See <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/>.

government is in dealing with these complex and multiple challenges, the greater the opening it is likely to provide groups set on VE (irrespective of ideology).

VII. PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS

It appears that the public version of USAID Bangladesh's CDCS for FY 2011-2016 doesn't recognize VE/I as a potentially recurring problem. This report suggests that VE/I should be viewed as a phenomenon that currently is in remission in Bangladesh but which could reemerge due to a variety of factors. Therefore, the principal implications for USAID programming are:

- First, USG/USAID should recognize that while the current risk of VE/I is relatively low, under certain circumstances VE/I could become a serious problem again. It is likely that VE/I leaders and groups will learn from their past failures and develop new strategies and tactics. Therefore, USG/USAID should assume there will be new variants of VIE in the future.
- Second, the RAB-led crack down by the government was central to containing VIE in 2005-2009. However, looking ahead, USG/USAID should not assume that same approach by the government will have the same results.
- Third, given the preceding points, USAID should remain attentive to the threat of VE/I and should look for opportunities to use existing programs – and not only DG programs – to bolster the gains made against VE/I over the last five years.

What might USAID Bangladesh do additionally or differently? It is beyond the scope of this report to give detailed programmatic recommendations, but the following general observations may be of some use.

- First, having democratic elections and effective governance reduces the need for political leaders (including, in the past, military rulers) to use Islam to legitimate their governments. Given this, USAID should continue to support efforts to improve the quality and legitimacy of democracy in Bangladesh. At the same time, it seems unrealistic to expect a fundamental change in the generally irresponsible and counter-productive behavior of the AL and BNP. Until this changes, focusing democracy and governance (DG) resources on corruption, justice, and human rights may be the best way to address some of the drivers of VE.
- Second, extremist ideas and influences will continue to have resonance with some Bangladeshi Muslims. Therefore, it will continue to be important to support efforts to promote pluralism and tolerance in Bangladesh. This could include continued support for efforts to engage and educate religious leaders – if for no other reason than to keep a finger on the pulse of the religious community. It also could include support for programs promoting Bengali culture (dealing with literature, dance, poetry, drama), given its proven ability to blunt the strident, austere Islam promoted by extremist groups. The Mission could also explore using other sectors' programs as platforms for promoting respect for and tolerance of pluralism.
- Third, if USAID hasn't done so already, it may want to assess its programs promoting women's empowerment through a "CVE lens." On the one hand, these programs may help to counter Islamist attempts to marginalize women. On the other hand, in certain circumstances they also could fuel Islamist assertions that US assistance seeks to undermine Islam and introduce un-Islamic Western values and practices.
- Fourth, it would be useful to better understand the ways that the Bangladeshi diaspora and overseas workers who have spent time in the Middle East serve as transmission belts for radical Islamist views. Research on this could be used to inform the design of programs that target individuals who have returned from work in the Middle East, as many tend to get radicalized as part of their experience there.

- Finally, the USG and USAID should ensure there is adequate Bangladeshi capacity to monitor and analyze extremist groups and the drivers of political and religious violence (including the use of social media). If this capacity is inadequate, then support should be provided to strengthen it.

ANNEX A: SUMMARY OF DRIVERS OF VE/I IN BANGLADESH

VE Drivers and Mitigants	Relevance in Bangladesh	Current Salience	Trend/Prospective Salience
A. Socio-Economic Drivers			
Unmet socioeconomic needs	Although Bangladesh's economy is growing at over 6% a year, about one third of the population lives in poverty and underemployment is a serious problem. Women and youth in rural areas are particularly vulnerable.	Moderate	Continuing and improving on the current economic growth is vital. A renewed economic crisis in the West and/or climate-related disaster could adversely impact the country's ability to improve socioeconomic needs.
Frustrated expectations/relative deprivation	Macro-economic growth, declining poverty and higher levels of education all create expectations that can be difficult to meet. The challenge of meeting expectations is amplified by Bangladesh's youth bulge.	Moderate	Government inability to accommodate aspirations of especially the relatively educated (be it in secular institutions or madrassas) could unleash pent up frustrations that promote violence and extremism.
Social networks and group dynamics	Mosques, Islamic schools, study groups and, increasingly, social media, represent an infrastructure that can be used to mobilize support for Islamist causes.	Low to Moderate	Links and interaction among Islamists within Bangladesh and between groups in the country and transnational entities stand to grow the more the current AL government is discredited and under a non-AL government that includes Islamist allies.
Social exclusion and marginality	Youth, women and minorities are the principal victims of social exclusion.	Low	AL's harassment of Grameen Bank, should it continue, will vitiate some of the economic gains rural women have made and make it easier for Islamists to marginalize women going forward. Social exclusion along gender and ethnic lines would be greater under a government that included Islamists while poverty alleviation programs will continue to be used by Islamists to bolster their base.
B. Political Drivers			

Discredited government/Endemic corruption and elite impunity	Both the AL and BNP have governed poorly, abused their power and discredited democracy.	Moderate	Unlikely to change. But a serious failure of government could result in another military take-over, which could benefit Islamists.
Government repression and violation of human rights	Since 2005 the government, using the RAB, has effectively repressed militancy and terrorism. This has involved extra-judicial detentions and killings by the security forces.	Moderate	Potential risk that indiscriminate and extra-judicial repression will generate new militancy.
Extremism condoned by portions of the political elite.	The BNP and JI government tolerated violence by JMB and other extremist groups.	Low	Low under AL government, higher under BNP government
Rejection of democracy as Western and un-Islamic/Appeal of system of government based on sharia law.	Currently only a relatively small portion of the population supports Islamic government and sharia law.	Low	Likely to continue to be low; but over time transnational Islamist influences combined with political elites' continuing venality could erode support for secular democracy.

C. Cultural Drivers

Islamization of society	There is a long term trend in Bangladesh toward increased religiosity and adherence to "Islamic" dress, practices, etc.	Moderate	Trend likely to continue; the ways and the extent to which Islamization will influence politics and militancy is unclear.
Proactive religious agendas (eg Wahabism/Salafism)	Greater exposure to Wahabi/Salafi influences through Bangladeshis working in the Middle East, internet and Saudi funding.	Low to Moderate	Likely to continue.
Islam under threat/ Broader cultural threats (traditions/culture)	"Islam under threat" is a common element of moderate and extremist Islamist rhetoric. But in a Muslim majority nation it has relatively limited appeal.	Low	Likely to remain low, but will become more significant if transnational Islamist organizations like HTB grow in size.

D. Mitigants/Resiliencies

Democratic political system	Political and electoral competition, vibrant civil society and other channels offer some hope of redressing grievances through non-violent means.	High	Uncertain. Democracy in Bangladesh remains vulnerable to destructive inter-party competition, corruption and abuse of power, and possible military intervention.
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Effective repressive measures	The government, largely through the RAB, has succeeded in dismantling most extremist groups.	High	There appears to be broad support for the use of repressive measures to combat extremism. But this may change if RAB abuses are seen to be excessive relative to the perceived threat of extremism. Also, it should be assumed that extremist groups will learn lessons from the past and adjust their strategies and tactics.
Pride in Bengali national identity	Traditionally has been seen as a counter-balance to Islamization.	Moderate	With the Bangladesh nation-state well established, Islamic identity may be becoming equally or more important than Bengali identity among a growing number of people in especially the middle classes.
Overseas employment and remittances	Overseas employment provides jobs to young men (principally) and their remittances enhance the welfare of many families.	Low-moderate	Will continue.

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