Comment

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The emerging Islamist plexus
in Bangladesh?

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Since the 1990s, Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh has been rising, not only in the parliamentary and political-administrative spheres, but also outside the institutional structure in the form of the emergence of militant outfits. Therefore, one can state that the Islamists are following a twofold strategy: First, trying to undermine the political system from within by using the opportunities offered in a democratic form of governance, which can be described as the formal 'political front' of the fundamentalist movement. Second, the building up of an informal, extra-constitutional 'militant front'. This finds its expression in the use of physical violence, armed confrontation, and other extra-judicial measures. Both strategies – political and militant – are aimed at achieving the core fundamentalist goal of establishing an Islamic state based on a narrow interpretation of Islam. One has to be aware, that this includes the elimination of democracy, the rejection of secularism, human rights, and especially women's rights in Bangladesh. Due to close linkages with Islamist terrorist organizations like the Taliban it is becoming more obvious that the Islamists in Bangladesh are increasingly applying the same tactics its peers use in Afghanistan in order to gain power.

In assessing the performance of the Islamists, one must state that they have made worrying progress. Due to a political alliance with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Islamist political front organizations became a part of the government and entrenched themselves in party politics as well as in key positions of the institutional structure. Regarding the militant front: The presence of Islamist parties in the political power structure, especially their anti-Indian, pro-Pakistan, and pro-Islamic policy, provide a convenient atmosphere for the growth of Islamic militancy. Furthermore, due to political patronage, especially the granting of impunity, militants felt increasingly encouraged to carry out their 'Islamisation' campaign by violent means. Especially in the rural areas this is gaining significance. In the earlier years it was common understanding that Islamic propaganda and action were confined to urban centre's, because people on the country side were more concerned with the daily life challenges than supporting religious fundamentalism. However, this argument must be questioned due to the increasing activities of the militant groups in rural areas. The following reasons must be mentioned: It is naïve to state, that unfortunate socio-economic conditions automatically lead to a disinterest towards religious fanaticism amongst the rural population. There is evidence from an international perspective, that especially because of the deterioration of living conditions, people are successfully targeted by Islamist recruiting patterns. Furthermore, due to the use of force combined with the patronage from local authorities, people in remote areas lack sufficient protection

against militant Islamists' campaigns and are forced to accept their influence and to follow their fundamentalist directives. Consequently, religious fundamentalists, due to support from Islamists and Islamists-friendly political parties, gained significant leverage not only over vast parts of the country, but also over large sections of the society, urban as well as rural. Additionally, the Islamist movement was able to build firm bridgeheads in all governmental departments and the societal institutional structure. In brief, the fundamentalists are developing a strong countrywide network to gain and maintain power in order to carry out an Islamist revolution.

In this context, one must state that Bangladesh Islamists are not only a firm and integrated part of a international terrorist network, but also a pivot of terror serving as an additional as well as alternative resource and coordination base, providing man power, training facilities, hideouts, and logistics. Even more, Bangladesh is increasingly functioning as a plexus between South East Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia, from Thailand to Afghanistan. Here one can state that there is correlation between the resurgence and re-strengthening of militant Islamist forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Osama bin Laden's well-known declaration in 1998 that called for an coordinated international Jihad, did not only heave al-Qaida, the Taliban and other groups into the larger picture but also made Bangladeshi Islamist groups and organisations part of global jihad.

In consequence, over the last years violent attacks by Islamists have been rising. But also in qualitative terms the threat scenario posed by militants is growing exponentially in Bangladesh. This finds its expression in more aggressive forms of fundamentalism. They have targeted 'recalcitrant' politicians, academics, journalists and bloggers, members of the judiciary, religious minorities, especially Buddhist, Hindus and Christians. Also moderate Muslims, who do not adhere to the extremist doctrines, are considered to be not Islamic (enough) and as such are labelled 'infidels' and subsequently-considered to be fair game. It is important to note, that the Islamists are not only fighting against members of certain religious minorities, or Islamic sects whom they view as un-Islamic (e.g. Ahmadiyya): the actions make it clear that Islamists want to eliminate everything which is related with these groups. In other words, they don't only fight the followers of certain religious communities but their belief systems as well: burning Holy Scriptures and other texts of religious significance, destroying houses of worship and respective educational institutions and socio-economic development facilities. Furthermore, since religion is very much intermingled with local traditions, habits and customs, as well as going along ethnic lines, Islamists are also destroying regionally orientated cultural

patterns, values and goods, like Bangladesh's syncretistic folk tradition. Since regional cultural-religious elements underpin plurality and tolerance in Muslim societies they are perceived as a threat towards the pan-Islamic world view of Islamists. It is a large threat to the omnipotence of the sole and narrow interpretation of Islam extremist elements adhere to. Therefore, Islamic fundamentalism is the most dangerous challenge not only towards the existence but also for the values Bangladesh stands for: democracy, secularism, and tolerance.

Instead of being a model for other countries with Muslim majority populations regarding the implementation of a democratic and secular form of governance, Bangladesh is dangerously close to turning into an autocratic, Islamic fundamentalist state. This is surprising since the majority of the Bangladeshis are committed to democratic order and secularism. Despite all the political turmoil, surveys confirm that a democratic regime is the most preferable form of government in Bangladesh. For example, IDEA's 2008 edition of the "State of Democracy in South Asia" points out that 69 per cent of the people are support democracy. Nevertheless, it seems that the political landscape in Bangladesh has changed to such an extent that even politicians and political parties, known as spearheads of secular and democratic principles, ignore the creeping Islamic takeover. This marks a trend which is

diametric opposite to the long moderate tradition of Islam in Bangladesh.

Therefore, one has to raise the question how this could happen. Why could Bangladesh transform from a state which perceived itself as deeply committed to secularism and tolerance, and as such the forefront of democratic transition in the Islamic world, to just another state which has to suffer from the choke of Islamic bigotry and fanaticism? In other words, why does the Bangladeshi state accept the deconstruction of its foundational identity, political-administrative system, and the terrorizing of its society? Needless to say, such a complex puzzle will be not solved easily, but a matrix of causalities can be identified. In general, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh is determined by endogenous (domestic) and exogenous (international) elements. Both streams of factors led to a troubled and tragic political scenario which enabled the existence of a breeding ground for religious fanaticism. Regarding the domestic dimension following reasons are predominantly responsible: To begin with, there is an unfortunate political culture which is determined by extraordinary polarisation, hostility, and politics of revenge between the two major political parties. By experiencing this, political actors see democracy as a zero-sum game marked by a destructive 'tit-for-tat' strategy in order to achieve partisan objectives which are prioritized over national concerns. In this

context, not only political institutions and society are highly politicised but also the whole governmental machinery. Appointments in politics and administration are based more on loyalty, obedience, obeisance, charisma, and kinship, rather than on performance, merits, and skills. As a result, many of the state agencies remain ineffective or absent in rural/remote areas which is yet just another nail in the coffin of already poor and stagnating governance. This has also enabled endemic corruption to spread like a wildfire. In addition to that, the undemocratic nature, unprofessional practice and behaviour of political parties contribute to the semblance of instability as well. Political parties possess a weak organizational structure, lack internal democracy and a code of ethics. They suffer from a high degree of intra-party factional feuds leading to numerous fissions (and fusions) in the past. Excessive personal leadership cult, dynastic rule, patron clientelism, as well as politics of patronage constitute other negative traits of the country's polity. At the same time, criminalization of politics, coercion as an acceptable mode of governance and widespread use of violence are punctuating the political landscape negatively. Subsequently politicians, rely on musclemen (mastaans/goondas) to achieve goals in an unrestricted struggle for power. Another important feature of Bangladesh's uncertain political climate is the tense civil-military relationship which led to indirect militarization of politics and direct military

rule. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that there is a lack of confidence of the people in the political leadership which implemented a highly centralized and personalised decision-making style extending the power distance between politicians and general public. The latter is just seen as an instrument to outbid the political enemy. This is gaining significance, since there is also no constructive working relationship between the government and opposition. In result, the parliament as the place for political debate to deal with issues concerning the opposition and the people (which are already hampered by low social capital and education/literacy) is paralysed and/or side-lined. Instead, in order to ventilate grievances, politics is moved towards the streets, especially by calling 'hartals' (general strikes) with detrimental ramifications for the already deteriorating socio-economic conditions. In addition to these internal factors, external ones were crucial for the growth of the Islamists as well. One of the most significant roles is played by Saudi Arabia, especially by its financial support and other economic benefits. like for (Sunni) Islamists, the Iranian revolution as inspiration for a global Islamist movement (mostly for the Shia stream), the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the emergence of the Taliban movement and other international militant groups (including the supportive role of Pakistan), and, last but not least, the troubled relations of Bangladesh with India and Myanmar/Burma, as well as the 'proxy-

war' between Pakistan and India.

To sum up, besides all these determinants which prepared the inroad for the Islamists into the political and social system of Bangladesh, there are also still indications of the general desire and political will of secular forces to stop this process of transforming the county into an Islamic fundamentalist state. But there is no doubt that the influence over state and society of Islamists is growing and the quality of democracy especially the respect of human rights is in a spiral decline. However, Bangladesh showed in the past that it is possible to form larger alliances. For example the massive political upheavals in 1990 or in 2006/2007, despite deep polarisation of society, the Bangladesh people and all kinds of civil society organisations, forced the political parties' leadership to build a national consensus and to form an alliance against military rule. Also today, there is a need for such a national consensus in order not only to bounce back from Islamic fundamentalism but also to eradicate it from Bangladesh.