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ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

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Part III: Bangladesh

It was raining when I arrived in Dhaka, the capitol of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, so named because of its original secular, socialist, and communist leanings, crystallized in its revolution, its *muktijuddho*, its war of liberation, its people's war, against West Pakistan. Bangladesh is a new nation state created December 16, 1971.

The new, modern airport was all but empty when we arrived at mid-day from New Delhi. Immigration asked my profession. I showed him my faculty card from NYU and said I had come to do research. I didn't elaborate. He asked where I was staying. I gave him the hotel name. He stamped my passport.

Journalists, I was told, have a hard time getting visas for Bangladesh. Soldiers in distinctive light blue and brown camouflage uniforms walked around holding rifles. I saw a soldier and a few airport workers with long beards, a sign of fundamentalism, but that was all.

Bangladesh has been called the most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International the worldwide NGO headquartered in Berlin. The country has had a new caretaker government since January 2007 backed by the military and, according to the rumors, by the U.S.

I rode in from the airport with a man I met on the plane, Mohammed Azad, wearing a suit, white shirt and tie. He was CEO of RIIA International, grain brokers and buyers of sugar, wheat, and pulses for Bangladesh. "Bangladesh does not have enough land to grow crops to feed its people," he said. "We have to import our food."

According to the International Monetary Fund country report 2005, the most recent available online, the specter of famine has been lifted from the country. There is another specter, however, hovering over Bangladesh that I had been reading about: the rise of militant Islamic fundamentalism.

I first learned of Bangladesh when George Harrison of the Beatles sang "Bangladesh," a song he wrote for his "Concert for Bangladesh." "It's such a mess," he sang. He raised money for its orphans and the consciousness of young people in the West.

I came here on an assignment for *National Geographic* in 1987. It was one of the poorest countries I had ever seen. I liked the people, the gentleness of village life and wanted to see if it really was becoming an Islamic fundamentalist state.

Few people think about Bangladesh. When I was here before, I saw one tourist, a young man carrying a backpack and riding a rickshaw. It was too poor, too crowded, and too dependent upon foreign aide; what former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger condescendingly once called a "basket case."¹

"I am afraid that in 20 years Bangladesh will be like Afghanistan. Islamic fundamentalism will take time, but it is coming," said Azid. "People here are like Europeans were in the 16th century: illiterate, believing in spiritual things."

When the British arrived in India, there were three million people in Bengal. Today there are 145 million people in an area about the size of Iowa. In 1905, Lord Curzon, the British viceroy of India, partitioned East Bengal and West Bengal, dividing Hindus and Muslims. The British reunited Bengal in 1911, taking away Muslim power, as they did elsewhere in India. They felt they needed their own country.

In August 1947 when Pakistan was created, it consisted of two parts: East Bengal and West Pakistan, 800 miles apart. Nearly 56% of its population was in East Bengal, 36% of

¹ *Time Magazine*, January 17, 1972.

which were Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus. The rest were Muslims. The new Pakistani army, particularly its officer corps, was mostly from West Pakistan. Only 300 officers out of 6,000 officers were Bengalis.²

The bureaucracy was mostly West Pakistani. Proceeds from the income tax went to West Pakistan. East Bengalis had to go to West Pakistan for loans and licenses. The majority of Indian Muslim businessmen who had migrated to Pakistan had moved to Karachi and other major West Pakistani cities.³

West Pakistan treated East Bengal like a colony. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Karachi born, secular lawyer, and revered founder and first leader of Pakistan, insisted in speeches in Dhaka in March 1948, that Urdu would be the country's official language.

Nearly 99% of the population of East Bengal spoke Bengali, a language that went back over a thousand years; in a land where many people were illiterate, oral traditions ran deep. East Bengal rebelled and on March 21, 1952, there was a general strike. The police killed four students from Dhaka University leading a demonstration. The Bengali liberation movement was born.

In 1955 East Bengal's name was changed to East Pakistan. On April 19, 1954, Bengali was finally made an official state language, and 1956 it was enshrined in the constitution, but it was too late. East Bengal wanted autonomy.

In 1941, Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, as noted, established the Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Unity Council) in India, stating that Islam did not distinguish between the spiritual and temporal worlds. He opposed nationalism because it separated the *umma*, the worldwide Muslim community. In Islam there is to be no separation between mosque and state.

In 1953 he was thrown into prison for instigating riots, led by Jamaat students against what he said were non-Muslims. Hundreds were killed. On April 29, 1955, he was released from prison because Pakistan, led by its military, wanted to enlist Islamic fundamentalists in its fight against the liberation movement that was growing in East Bengal.

The Islamic fundamentalist-Pakistani military alignment had begun. On January 17, 1951, General Ayub Khan, a Pashtun, became the first Pakistani commander-in-chief of the Pakistani army. Before this, British officers had commanded for the first four years of Pakistan's existence.

² Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror*, Armonk, NY, and London, England: M. E. Sharpe, 2005.

³ Hiranmay Karlekar, "Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan," New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 2005, p. 40.

In 1948, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the secular founder of Pakistan who called for religious pluralism, died of tuberculosis. In 1956 Pakistan became the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Two years later in 1958, Khan became president, its first military ruler, and drew close to the U.S.

By 1958, with the establishment of CENTO and SEATO, Pakistan and the U.S. had become allies in the Cold War against communism. The U.S. provided aid, which increased Pakistan's wealth but also inequality, and prices started to rise. The army, the main recipient of this aid, began to invest in industry, to become the industrial force that it is today.

Meanwhile, under Khan, in East Pakistan, public meetings were banned, the press was censored, and it became illegal to import books and music from West Bengal, India. The government banned the songs written by the Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, Asia's first Nobel laureate,⁴ from the radio.

A joke at the time went that the only tie between West Pakistan and East Pakistan was Pakistani International Airways.⁵

In 1965 India and Pakistan fought their second war, which ended in a stalemate although Pakistan lost more men. On February 12, 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of East Pakistan's Awami (People's) League, its main secular political party, called for elections, autonomy, an East Bengali militia, and, in order to stop capital from going to West Pakistan, its own currency. West Pakistan considered this to be sedition.

On February 21, 1969, General Khan, under growing public opposition to his rule, announced that he would not seek reelection. The next month General Yahya Khan of West Pakistan became president. On March 17, 1969, West Pakistan announced that it was sending ships with soldiers and tanks to East Pakistan.

Azad's driver left the airport road, and we soon reached the city. Steam rose from the crowded muddy streets, filled with the sound of horns and three-wheeled rickshaw motors. Dhaka lies in a wide delta, part of the Bay of Bengal, whose water, a mixture of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, flows down from the Himalayas through Assam in northeast India and into Bangladesh. There is flooding. In 1998, two-thirds of the country was covered by water.

Dhaka has over 10 million people, 20% of whom live on a dollar a day or less; a seven-domed Mogul mosque built in the 17th century, and a colossal stone parliament

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, 186-1941, born in Bombay, is considered India's greatest modern writer. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

⁵ Author interview with Shahriar Kabir, Dakha, March 2007.

building built by American architect Louis Khan. Bangladesh, 57,000 square miles, is the eighth most populated country in the world.⁶

Azad, like other Bangladeshis I would meet, felt a strong, patriotic bond with his countrymen. There was still a feeling of pride and solidarity, a strong sense of nationalism, 35 years after their war of independence.

“In 1971 there was a non-communal feeling in the country. We were one people fighting for our freedom. The Bangladesh Liberation Front (BLF) had 19 districts, each with a commander and two sub-commanders; my brother was one of the 38 zone commanders,” he said.

I asked this intelligent middle class “man in the street,” to explain in his view the rise of Islamic fundamentalism that he so feared.

“I have one son. Another man has 5–10 sons, with no education, or enough food to feed them all. My three brothers and I could defend ourselves. My son will not be able to because the law is not strong enough for him. I am middle towards upper middle class. Below is the middle lower, lower, and densely populated lower class.”

The fundamentalists, he said, would draw from this vast reservoir of poor, uneducated people, against whom his educated only son, because of government weakness, would not have enough power.

“When the Soviets were in power, students supported the Soviet Union,” he said. “I too supported the communists. Then I went into business and changed my thinking. Because the students supported the Soviets, the fundamentalists couldn’t rise. The Arabs opposed our independence. They wanted Pakistan, a Muslim country, to stay together. Divided, we were weaker.”

We reached my hotel, in the center of the city. From my room, I watched some children playing tag on a roof and below men carrying heavy burlap bags on their heads. As evening fell, the muezzin’s call to prayer, the *azzan*, for the fourth and next to final prayer of the day, mixed with the horns of traffic and the sound of motorized rickshaws pressing forward in the rain.

“The U.S. wanted us to stay together because it supported Pakistan,” said Azid. “Through the 1980s the USSR said socialism was the only way to help the poor and to create an equal society. Communist and socialist leaders in Bangladesh were always against religion. The U.S. patronized fundamentalist groups against the USSR.”

⁶ *My Architect*, the 2006 award-winning documentary film, is about Louis Khan.

“If the USSR had not fallen, the politics among students, and in the entire country, would have been different. Bangladesh is under tremendous pressure to hang some fundamentalists today who are behind some bombings. The country is watching. The fundamentalists do not affect me now, but I am afraid for the future.”

In 1969, General Yahya Khan began negotiations with Mujibur Rahman, who said that he only wanted autonomy, not succession.⁷ On December 7, 1970, there were elections to the National Assembly. The Awami League won 160 of 162 seats, East Pakistan’s portion, giving it a majority in the 300 seat assembly.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) won 81 of 138 seats, which were West Pakistan’s portion.⁸ Rahman, it seems, reneged on his commitment to Khan, saying that because the Awami League won a majority he had the right to form a government. Khan, and Bhutto refused to accept Rahman’s victory. Both sides refused to budge.

In Sindh Province, whose capital is Karachi, in West Pakistan, G. M. Syad, leader of the Sindh Nationalist Party, saw the Awami victory as an opportunity for Sindhi independence. Baluchistan, Pakistan’s largest but least populated province, had been agitating for independence since 1948. Pakistan risked coming apart.

Two days before the National Assembly was to convene, Khan called off the opening session. There were demonstrations in the streets of Dhaka. The military was called in, but it could not handle the crowds.

“The war was initially a desire for autonomy,” said Shahriar Kabir, a writer, former executive editor of *Bichitra (Varieties)*, a news magazine, and later an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience. We sat in his office, next to his house, in Dhaka. The rain had stopped, and it was a warm clear spring day.

“From March 1-25, 1971, it was a nonviolent, noncooperation war. At midnight on the 25th, the army cracked down. They killed 60,000 that first night. India declared its support.”

The army’s campaign was called “Operation Searchlight,” and it became what can only be called a pogrom directed at its own people.⁹ Over the next nine months, the Pakistani army killed three million people, raped over 300,000 girls and women,

⁷ Owen Bennet Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003. p. 153.

⁸ Bhutto, father of Benazir Bhutto, was prime minister from 1973-1977, and was hanged by Lieutenant General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq on July 5, 1977.

⁹ Jones, p. 162.

destroyed whole villages, killing the women and children, and sent millions of refugees streaming into India.¹⁰

Elements of Jamaat-i-Islami, either on Maududi's orders or on their own, joined the Pakistani army. They said they were killing the "enemies of Islam."¹¹

On May 1, 1971, India's Chief of Army Staff issued a secret order beginning India's war, long planned, as it turns out, to help dismember Pakistan.¹² On December 3, 1971, in retaliation, Pakistan attacked India. Full scale war broke out. Six Indian divisions invaded East Pakistan. The war lasted two weeks. India won.

Over 90,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered to the Indian army and to Bangladesh's Mukti Bahini, its Liberation Army, in East Pakistan on December 16, 1971. It is the largest surrender since World War II.

"The Pakistani army was told it was waging a jihad," said Kabir. "They killed in the name of Islam. Pakistan said that we Bengalis were infidels and not true Muslims.¹³ They said we were small, lazy, were cowards and ate fish, and thus we were weak. They needed to justify their atrocities by saying we were an inferior race and did not practice Islam."

"They considered the women to be their property – *Maal-e-Ganimat*, people's property; words taken from the *Koran* – and so they could do what they wanted with them." *Now enjoy what ye have won, as lawful and good, and keep your duty to Allah. Lo! Allah is forgiving, Merciful.*"¹⁴

Not every Bengali, as noted, wanted independence. Jamaat-i-Islami, the Muslim League, and other Muslim groups fought the Mukti Bahini. They formed the Razakar, al-Shams, and the al-Badr brigades, which the press, Kabir, and other human rights activists call killing squads.¹⁵

¹⁰ Shahriar Kabir, *Bangladeshe Amraa ebong Ona (We and They in Bangladesh)*, Dhaka: Ananya, 2005.

¹¹ Abbas, p. 63.

¹² Praveen Swami, *India Pakistan and the Secret Jihad*, Asian Security Studies, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 118-119.

¹³ There are many stories of members of the Taliban being surprised to hear the Adhan, the Muslim call to prayer, behind Northern Alliance lines. They, too, thought they were fighting infidels.

¹⁴ Al-Anfil (The Spoils) 8:69, *The Qur'an*.

¹⁵ "The Razakar . . . should be especially helpful as members of rural communities who can identify guerrillas (freedom fighters)" an army officer (Pakistan) said. The government says it has already recruited more than 22,000 Razakar of a planned force of 35,000." *The New York Times*, July 30, 1971. "To fully control the Bengali population, the army has been setting up a network of peace committees, superimposed upon the normal civil administration which the army cannot fully rely upon. Peace committee members are drawn from . . . the Behris, Muslim League, and Jamaat-i-Islami. The peace committees serve as the agent of the army informing on the civil administration as well as on the general

Muslim fundamentalists, the U.S., China, and other Muslim countries, all for their own reasons, did not want Pakistan divided up. The U.K., continuing what Siddiqui, at Deoband, called its long-standing policy of divide and rule, supported Bangladesh. Bhutto was so angry that in 1972, Pakistan left the British Commonwealth.

India, and its ally the Soviet Union, backed the pro-independence forces. President Richard Nixon feared Soviet expansion into South and Southeast Asia and sent the U.S.S. *Enterprise* into the Bay of Bengal, ostensibly to rescue American citizens.

India saw this as a nuclear threat. The Soviet Union sent naval forces into the region. China, Pakistan's ally, and with which the U.S. would soon seek a rapprochement using Pakistan as the intermediary, sent materiel to Pakistan but chose not to provoke India beyond that.

It had defeated India in a border war in 1962 over the McMahon Line, which, like the Durand Line, is a residue of its colonial past, a border drawn by Sir Henry McMahon, foreign secretary of British India, in 1913 between India and Tibet. China does not accept it, while India does. But China did not want to risk a confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Both India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), its new intelligence agency formed under Indira Gandhi, and Pakistan's Inter-service Intelligence Directorate (ISI) were involved in the war. RAW worked with the Mukti Bahni and the ISI with Jamaat and the Muslim League, this latter an alliance, I was told, that exists today.

"The principal terrorist organization in South Asia is the ISI," said Dr. Ajai Sahni, an Indian, Hindu, and editor of the *South Asia Intelligence Review*. "It is the biggest fundamentalist organization. Its footprints are everywhere. It has bred jihadist groups and keeps them alive. Once you have inspired them you cannot abandon them or stop them, or you become a traitor."

I had visited him in his office in New Delhi. Armed guards stood at the gate. He listed the names of some groups: Lashkar-e-Taybia (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed, Hezb-i-mujahideen, and others, all well-known in the world of militant Islam. LeT has been tied to the London tube and Mumbai train bombings.

"The ISI is a disciplined segment of the army and which reports to its chief, General Musharraf. The U.S. knows it is playing both sides. The U.S. can bomb a nation to

populace. They are also in charge of confiscating and redistribution of shops and lands from Hindus and pro-independence forces." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 1971.

extinction in 48 hours, but doesn't know how to handle wars in nations with 26 and 38 million. How would it handle 168 million Pakistanis?"

After losing the war, Pakistani General Yahya Khan, who the night before the army was to surrender was drunk with his mistress at a housewarming he was giving in Peshawar,¹⁶ was forced to resign. He was placed under house arrest. On December 16, 1971, the army surrendered.

Ali Bhutto took over as martial law administrator. From June 28–July 2, he met with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at Shimla, India, where he negotiated a postwar settlement.

In exchange for the release of the captured Pakistani soldiers, prevention of war crimes trials for Pakistani officers, and return of land lost to India, Bhutto agreed to change the name of the cease-fire line in Jammu and Kashmir to the Line of Control, thus giving a sense that Pakistan accepted this as the border.

The Line of Control separates India from Pakistan in Kashmir today; privately, it is said, Bhutto agreed to make the border permanent at a time in the future.¹⁷

The Bangladeshi flag is a red disk, the rising sun, signifying a new nation and the blood of those who sacrificed, on a field of green, signifying the country's lush vegetation. It is appropriate. The national anthem is "My Golden Bengal" written by Tagore.

The People's Republic of Bangladesh had fought a people's war against the "Wadera," a Sindhi word meaning landlord, the military rulers of West Pakistan, and it had won. On September 17, 1974, Bangladesh was accepted into the U.N.

"From 1971-1975, we were poor and the secular Awami Party ruled," said Azad. The party still had its strong socialist leanings. The U.S. disapproved. In 1974, the U.S. threatened to cut off aid to the young country unless it stopped exporting jute, its main crop, a plant from whose fiber burlap and rope are made, to Cuba.

Sheikh Mujabur Rahman, head of the Awami League, the democratic, secular, and in a great many ways, the founder of Bangladesh, started to become authoritarian and established himself as president for five years. To accommodate Islamic fundamentalists, who had been discredited because of their ties to Pakistan during the war, he banned alcohol and gambling, and joined the Organization of Islamic Conference.

¹⁶ Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism*, Amonk, NY, and London, England: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2005, p. 66.

¹⁷ Swami, *India, Pakistan, and the Secret Jihad*, p. 122.

While most Jamaat leaders were arrested immediately after the war ended, a few went underground and resurfaced in Pakistan and later in London from which they began to rebuild Jamaat.¹⁸

Rahman declined to prosecute most of the 37,471 cases against Jamaat members and others accused of rape, torture, and murder under the Bangladesh Collaborators Order 1972. Most collaborators were given amnesty in hopes they would help rebuild the country. They returned to political life.¹⁹

These acts of forgiveness would not be enough to save his life. The new constitution of Bangladesh, promulgated November 4, 1972, stated in the preamble that the country accepted “nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism” as principles of state policy.

It was shown by the carnage in East Pakistan that Islam alone was not enough to keep the country together. The nationalism of Bengali identity, the anger over mistreatment, the arrogance of those who thought they were better, won out over Islam.

On the night of August 15, 1975, tanks rolled up outside Rahman’s small house. He told his family not to worry, that he would take care of things. He and all but two members of his family were assassinated. Two of his daughters were in Germany. Three months later on November 3, a group of soldiers jailed the leadership of the Awami League; specifically all those who had led the liberation struggle and assassinated them.²⁰

There are reports that the CIA was involved in the assassinations.²¹ The new regime now moved away from Moscow and New Delhi, its principal backers, and became more dependent upon the U.S., China, and Saudi Arabia. With the pro-socialist, secular regime gone, Islamic fundamentalists began to gain greater influence.

Coups and countercoups followed, until out of this chaos emerged a military leader, Major General Ziaur Rahman. In November 1975 he became chief martial law administrator. Islamic fundamentalists began to gain greater influence. On April 21, 1977, Rahman made himself president and began to amend the constitution.

The preamble was changed to now begin with “*Bismallah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful)*”. Religious political parties, once banned, were allowed to form. Secularism was removed as a part of the nation’s policy. Parliament ratified the constitutional changes.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁰ The Awami party leadership was attacked again on August 21, 1974, by grenades at a party rally in Dhaka.

²¹ Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*, London: Z-Publishers, 1979.

“When Louis Khan got the contract to design the parliament building, there was no democracy in Pakistan,” said Kabir. “The parliament was to meet half the year in Islamabad, half the year in Dakha.”

The Jatiyo Sangshad Bhaban, or National Assembly Building, is a massive stone structure, with steps leading up to it. It is considered Khan’s masterpiece. He was asked why he designed such a large building. “I designed it this way so that people would see it and develop a respect for democracy.”²² It sits on a hill today, with lights shining on it at night, a symbol of hope to democrats, but not to those who believe that democracy is a western religion and the enemy.

The vast majority of Muslims in South Asia are neither fundamentalist nor militant, but in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, a minority element is militant and committed. Human rights activists would show me lists of between 65 and 100 militant Islamic groups now in Bangladesh, and talk of secret training camps in the Chittagong hill tracts along the border with Burma, now called Myanmar, and arms smuggled from abroad.²³

There is a war going on in Bangladesh between fundamentalists and secularists, just as there is in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. It burst into the open in Bangladesh on August 25, 2005, when Jamaat i-Islami set off 600 bombs around the country.²⁴

The bombs appeared intended to frighten more than to harm people. Two people were killed, although over 100 people were injured. Those behind the bombings were in prison, awaiting execution, for a long time. Mr. Azad spoke of them. The government executed them March 30, 2007. Dhaka remained quiet.

Bombing, as a form of terrorism, began a few years earlier. “The first bomb went off in Jessore, June 3, 1999,” said Father Richard Timm, 84, an American Catholic priest who has worked in Dhaka for over 50 years. “A drama group was performing an ancient Bengali play, and fundamentalists considered it anti-Islamic. These plays go all night, as actors, with prompting from the audience, perform dramas that have existed since time immemorial.”

He sat in his office at Caritas, the international Catholic aid and development organization. “The Jesuits established a church in Bengal on January 1, 1600,” said Father Timm. “One church at Tejgaon was built in 1677 and is still standing.” Tejgaon is now an industrial part of Dhaka. The Christian church has had a long history in South Asia.

²² Interview with Shahriar Kabir, Dakha, March 2007.

²³ Conversations with Rosaline Costa, Caritas, and Shahriar Kabir, in Dhaka, February 2007.

²⁴ The figure is disputed. Shamsher M. Chowdhury, Bangladeshi ambassador to the U.S. said in an interview (Internet/Google: “The people We Produce Are Tolerant”) that there were 434 bombs.

Saint Thomas, it is said, arrived by boat in South Asia in 52 A.D. from the Middle East. Traders had been plying the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, between the Middle East and South Asia, long before the advent of Christianity and Islam. St. Thomas planted the seeds of Christianity, which took root in South Asia.

Islam arrived in southern India in 711, the same year that it reached Europe, a more recent date in the long history of Bengali culture. Muslims consider Muhammad to be the last in a line of prophets that extends from Adam to Jesus. Muslims believe that Muhammad brought the final word of God.

Dhaka newspapers, reflecting the conflicts in Bengali culture, list three dates: in the Bengali (Bangla), Muslim, and Gregorian (Christian) calendars.

“Timeo hominum unius libris,” said Father Timm, speaking in Latin. “I fear the man of one book.” It is a Roman saying. He meant those who follow only the *Qur’an*. “The problem with the Taliban,” said a former mujahideen commander I talked to in Kabul, “is that you can’t talk to them. They have all the answers.”

“At one time they used to say, ‘Scratch a Muslim and you find a Hindu beneath,’ but not anymore,” said Timm. “There is creeping fundamentalism here that began about 15 years ago. Once there was a tolerant Sufi form of Islam here, but now you must put your hand on the *Qur’an* when taking the oath of office.”

“The government has taken American MTV off the air, but let an Indian version, which I don’t consider immoral, to stay on. Before, they took down movie posters with their pictures of ‘buxom babes’ on them, which drew in the rickshaw drivers. The government required all boys to wear prayer caps, but that has stopped now.”

The International Crisis Group (ICG), in an October 2006 report on Bangladesh, agrees that fundamentalism is on the rise but tempers its view. “A creeping process of Islamisation is indeed underway, some of it channeled deliberately by political organizations with long-term agendas to transform Bangladesh into a strict Islamic state,” said the authors.

“Their efforts appear to be helped, at least indirectly, by an inflow of Gulf funding for madrasas, mosque construction, and Islamist development efforts, as well as a long-standing subsidy for petroleum imports. The moderate majority has not actively resisted Islamist encroachment: The ‘tolerant mass’ *hasn’t* been making headway against extremists, despite its huge size. This is partly out of fear (moderates don’t want to put themselves at risk), but also because they are disillusioned with politics in general.”²⁵

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Dhaka, April 2006.

“However, there are mixed messages. More burqas may be worn on the streets of the capital and rural towns, but the backdrop is still one of garishly painted movie posters and ever more revealing advertisement billboards. Money from the Gulf is not necessarily as nefarious as some claim.”

“Much of it is for useful social work, including basic education. The disturbing aspects are that Gulf-funded madrasas are completely beyond state control or regulation, and some development projects are clearly designed essentially as Islamist party-building efforts.”

Dhaka is filled with bicycle rickshaws, a silent, steady never-ending stream of wiry men with muscled legs pushing forward, ringing their bicycle bells, carrying other human beings, modern beasts of burden, yet giving employment to the poor.

To visit the city’s vegetable market, with its hum of human voices and people packed tightly together with no sign of modern technology except low hanging electric lights overhead, is to step back in time to another century. Sellers sit on their haunches, in a driving rain, selling okra, cauliflowers, tomatoes, radishes.

Four men beneath a shed throw dice, oblivious to everything around them. Laborers wearing thongs or in bare feet, their backs straight, carry burlap sacks of wheat and sugar on their heads, the bags hanging over on each side. Beggars, many of them deformed, perhaps by a mafia that maims them, as mafias do in Cairo and other cities, come up to rickshaws and cars, at traffic lights. They give a portion of their earnings to their boss. Mothers, too, send their children to beg. One girl climbed onto the three-wheeled motorized rickshaw I was riding in and kept putting her hand to her mouth, as child beggars do, saying she was hungry. I had just given money to a girl, and half a dozen children crowded around.

The air is hard to breathe in Dhaka. Traffic police wear surgical masks, as they do in Kabul, and from a distance looking down, the air is gray. But the government is trying, and the pollution does not seem to be as bad as it was in 1987. Motorized rickshaws, which like bicycle rickshaws give employment to the poor and uneducated, crowd the streets of South Asia from Peshawar to Chittagong. Rickshaws in Dhaka are now nicknamed CNGs, for compressed natural gas, on which they now run.

One night I watched tribal women from the countryside, with rings on their toes, bright colored lungis, and diaphanous shawls over their heads, get ready to sleep beneath a tarp with their children on the sidewalk, while behind them in a clean, shiny store, a row of high definition televisions showed a soccer game from England.

Few, if any, village women, it appeared, based on what I saw the short time I was in Dhaka, were veiled. Like the chador (burqa) in Afghanistan, the veil is for middle class urban Muslim women who don’t have to work with their hands, in the fields, washing

clothes in a stream, picking through garbage, or selling fruit in a market. I saw women wearing the black abbaya carrying purses, but there didn't seem to be more than I would see in Islamabad.

I rode a crowded minibus one day across the city. It cost five tika. There are 70 to a dollar. Passengers were polite to one another, and sat quietly except two men in the back talking business. One young middle class woman in a white pants suit wore a hijab covering her hair like a good Muslim, but her nails were bright red, the two sides of her: one religious, one worldly.

She mirrored the two sides of Dhaka, of Bangladesh, of South Asia, and of much of the Muslim world. She, like most Bengali women, was thin, but here it is because they work all day in the fields, or, as thousands do in New Delhi, digging with shovels and pick axes while their children sit beside them, or do what labor they can in Dhaka.

It is women who suffer most as Islamic fundamentalism rises. One evening I went to see Aroma Dutta, a Hindu, writer and founder of PRIP, an NGO with long ties to the U.S. government. "In 2001, I began to see in the Dhaka papers – there are 14 dailies in this city – stories of rapes in areas in the south populated by minorities," she said. "I did research, and found hundreds of cases of women and girls raped, and in front of their families."

She wrote letters to the U.S. and U.K. ambassadors, to the World Bank director for Bangladesh and other officials. In response to her inquiries, she said the government refused to give her the money that she received from abroad for PRIP, said she wasn't paying taxes, and implicated her in a bombing attack.

"I got anticipatory bail and said I have to fight," she said. "The fundamentalists – Jamaat – want to purge the country of minorities, therefore their campaign to rape women, especially Christians and Hindus. They want a Muslim country."

The most violent of the fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh wishing to create such a Muslim nation is *Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), the Movement of Islamic Holy War*, said to have 15,000 members. In 2002, the U.S. State Department declared it a terrorist organization, with ties to militant groups in Pakistan.²⁶

"Minorities feel attached to the liberation movement. The Awami League can count on the Hindu vote. Jamaat wants to clear these votes away. In India, people are protected by the constitution and a strong civil society. Here we have no such protection."

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, Washington, DC: Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, May 21, 2002.

In 1978, General Rahman launched the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and moved closer to Pakistan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. Jamaat reemerged as a political party at a rally in Dhaka in May 1979. Rahman was assassinated in May 1981, and there came another series of power struggles. In March 1982, Lieutenant General H. M. Ershad took power.

Ershad made Islam the state religion and called for a mosque-based society in Bangladesh. A new type of Muslim nationalism was slowly replacing the secular Bengali nationalism that once so captivated Bengalis. Like Lieutenant General Zia ul Haq in Pakistan, now a front-line state in the war against communism, waging jihad in Afghanistan, General Ershad used fundamentalists as allies in his war against secularist political parties.

Jamaat and their political allies, with funds from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, grew as political forces. In 1978, there were 375,000 students attending madrasahs in Bangladesh. In 1992, there were 1,735,000 in attendance. Under Ershad there was 100% increase in the number of madrasahs.²⁷

Public schools in Bangladesh are inadequate, and most families are too poor, as in most parts of South Asia, to send their children to private schools. In 2002, according to one report, there were 3.34 million children studying in madrasahs in Bangladesh, five times as many as in Pakistan.²⁸

In 1990, popular opposition to Ershad forced him to resign. A caretaker government, allowed for in the 13th amendment to the constitution, came to power and called for elections. The BNP, now led by Begum Khaleda Zia, General Rahman's widow, won.

A woman was prime minister of largely Muslim Bangladesh, a position she held until 1996, while Islamic fundamentalists grew in power and attacks on secular NGOs and the persecution of women increased.²⁹ There were powerful men around her with deeply entrenched views.

Sheikh Hasina Wajed, who had been in West Germany with her sister when her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the rest of her family were assassinated, had also entered politics. She became president of the Awami League. In 1996, the Awami League defeated the BNP, and she became Prime Minister, a position she held until July 2001.

²⁷ Tazeen M. Murshid, *Women, Islam and the State in Bangladesh; Subordination and Resistance*, at www.swadhinta.org.uk/misc/womenBdeshTazeen.pdf.

²⁸ Mumtaz Ahmed, *Madrassa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh*, Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, August 19-22, 2002.

²⁹ Hiranmay Karlekar, *Bangladesh: The next Afghanistan?* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005, p. 57.

The BNP made an alliance with Islamic political parties, Jamaat-i-Islami, Jatiya (National) Party, and Islami Oikya Jot (Islamic National United Front), and returned to power in 2001.

On August 21, 2004, a grenade attack on an Awami party rally in Dakha aimed at its leadership, left 22 dead and over 200 wounded. Sheikh Hasina Wajed was not hurt.

In October 2006, there were street clashes in Dhaka between supporters of the BNP coalition and the Awami League. In January another state of emergency was declared, elections were postponed, and yet another caretaker government, this time backed by the military, came to power.

Just as Muslim Pakistan has had a woman Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, twice elected, and Muslim, and secular Turkey has had a woman Prime Minister, Tancu Ciller (1993-95), so now has Muslim Bangladesh, more than once. Yet in each of these countries, there is a significant Islamic fundamentalist minority.

In Bangladesh, as in Pakistan, religious political parties rarely have received more than 15% of the vote in any election, yet the major parties feel they need them to form political alliances. In the October 2001 elections, Jamaat became Bangladesh's third largest party, with 17 seats in the parliament and two ministers in the coalition government. It knows its goal of an Islamic state will come slowly.

Ms. Dutta talked about her grandfather, Dharendra Nath Dutta, a prominent member of the Pakistani National Assembly, who was the first to say that Bengali should be one of Pakistan's national languages.

"The Pakistani army came on March 29, blinded my grandfather, tortured my uncle in our house, took my grandfather away, tortured him for two weeks, and then killed him. He was 85. I vowed then never to leave Bangladesh." Her grandfather was, according to reports, taken away to an army cantonment and never seen again. He was a Hindu, but in Bangladesh, he is referred to as a *shaheed*, or martyr for the Bengali, not Muslim, cause.

In 2004 the U.S. State Department asked Dutta to testify on abuses of women in New York. "Did I have the courage?" she asked rhetorically. The government said if she went it would imprison her upon her return. The U.S. ambassador picked her up at the airport when she returned. The current caretaker government cleared her of any wrongdoing. "We have been mowed down, like a lawnmower, by the fundamentalists," she said. "It is transnational fundamentalism."

As I sat in my room that night, again listening to the evening call to prayer competing with noise of traffic, as if two sides of life, the religious and the secular were competing

with one another, I read a quote in the newspaper by Lieutenant General Moeen Ahmed, head of the Bangladeshi army. "The president has declared an emergency under a compelling situation. Corruption had engulfed every sphere of life . . . We were victorious in 1971. We have faced tidal bores and cyclones with courage and fortitude. We will be able to resolve the problems with our united efforts."

The key word is united. Bangladesh may be united only in its opposition to corruption, but corruption in Afghanistan is what gives power to the Taliban. Every country is divided, but few countries have young men who shout, "We will all be Taliban and Bangladesh will be Afghanistan," as members of the HUJI were doing just a few years ago.³⁰

The current caretaker government, led by Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former central banker and World Bank bureaucrat, is trying to clean up the corruption. Ahmed gave an interview recently to *Time*.³¹ The reporter asked if he was afraid for his own safety. He said no.

I went to see Dr. Kazi Faruk Ahmed, head of Proshika, an NGO that has been working with the poor since the 1970s.³² Armed guards stood in front of a high iron gate in front of his office. "I have a fatwa (religious ruling) on my head," said Ahmed. "I am considered a mutard, one who is against Islam. Mufti Amini declared publicly that I should be killed because I called for women's improvement."³³

"I try to empower the poor 'holistically,' meaning economically, culturally, politically; we loan money to the poor, train them how to use it, how to save, teach them job skills, health care . . . Therefore the fundamentalists object."

I asked him to explain. Political religious parties provide charity, health care, and education as part of their mission. In October 2005, Jamaat, its competitor Jamiat-i-Islami, and other religious parties, rushed to the earthquake zone in Pakistan.

"Fundamentalists run faith-healing businesses: they blow into water, recite from the *Koran* and then sacrifice a goat or a chicken," said Ahmed. "Without health services people rely upon faith. Not all diseases are life-threatening. When someone gets well, they can take credit for this hocus-pocus. We provide health care. The fundamentalists say we are making the people unbelievers, when in fact we are taking away their business."

³⁰ *Time*, October 14, 2002.

³¹ *Time*, April 2, 2007, pp. 24-25.

³² Jeremy Seabrook, *Freedom Unfinished: Fundamentalism and Popular Resistance in Bangladesh Today*, London: Zed Books, 2001.

³³ Mufti Fazul Huq Amini is a member of the Bangladesh parliament and a member of Islami Oikya Jote, a fundamentalist party that was part of the coalition government of Bangladesh from 2001-06.

“Islamic society is a male-dominated society,” said Ahmed. “It is afraid of losing power. In Bangladesh, we have had two women in power, and neither promoted women’s rights. They were surrounded by men.”

“Fundamentalism has nothing to do with the spiritual form of religion,” said Ahmed. “Fundamentalists use religion as a mask.”

I feel that religion and power go hand in hand. Religion gives people the strength to pursue power, as it gave strength to Turkish tribes in Central Asia as they moved west, creating the Muslim Ottoman Empire, the last Caliphate.

In December 2005, however, I met with members of Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan at a house in the earthquake zone in Kashmir. “I am a fundamentalist,” an intense, serious, unsmiling young lawyer said. “I believe in the fundamentals of Islam.” His fellow workers gave me a computer presentation showing their efforts to help the earthquake victims.

They were proud that they had worked with Western aid workers and with U.S. soldiers. Across the narrow street was a Jamaat madrasah for girls. It was a brick building, and there were no windows. “All our problems would be solved in Pakistan,” said the lawyer, “if we created a true Muslim society.” He gave me books by Maududi to read, hoping to convert me. It happens often.

“Students go to schools that I opened,” said Ahmed. “The poor realize that a madrasah will not give their children a good education. Our schools, with money from the E.U., provide one teacher for 30 students. Our program is hitting the fundamentalists’ business.”

On October 14, 2002, *Time* ran a story on al-Qaeda’s presence and jihadist movements in Bangladesh. Since then it has been difficult, generally impossible I was told, for journalists to enter Bangladesh. The country, so dependent upon foreign aid, does not want to be seen as an incubator of fundamentalism or a future Afghanistan.

Time talked about members of al-Qaeda arriving by boat near Chittagong in 2002, of Ayman al-Zawahiri visiting there for months before disappearing into Myanmar with Muslim Rohingya rebels. People told me that Osama bin Laden went to Banderban up in the Chittagong Hill Tracts along the border with Myanmar in 1995. This is a forested, sparsely populated region of Bangladesh. I heard reports, but could not verify at all, that there are al-Qaeda training camps in the Chittagong Hill Tracts today.

“There are training camps in the seven sister states of northeast India—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura—and in the hills of

Chittagong where the ISI has training camps, according to the reports I get," said Ahmed.

Kabir showed me pictures of young men standing, smiling, in group photos, taken, he said, in Libya. "Some of these men are Bangladeshis," he said. "They are training in Libya to be terrorists. One quit and told me his story. Boats come into the Bay of Bengal and offload weapons for the training camps up in the hill tracts."

"The ISI is working all around India," said Sahni in Delhi. "It is in Assam, which is a Muslim majority area, and other parts of northeast India. It is working with Jamaat in Bangladesh. It has its jihadist outfits in Kashmir."

It is hard, if not impossible, to verify these allegations. However, one of the six men who is reported to have signed the fatwa announcing bin Laden's World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders on February 23, 1998, was Fazlur Rahman, "Emir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh." HUJI is said to belong to this group.³⁴

In the 1980s, about 6,000 Bangladeshis went to Afghanistan. In 1992, many of them returned and formed HUJI to carry on the jihad and to create a pure Islamic government in Bangladesh.³⁵ I was told that after 9/11, the rest of those who went to Afghanistan returned to Bangladesh.

In late 1986 I got a call came from an editor at *National Geographic*. "Does the name Brahmaputra mean anything to you?" he asked. We had met briefly three years before. I hadn't heard from him since, and now a call, and this question.

It was a mountain range, a religion or a river. "The river?"

"Yes," he said. "We would like you to follow its length and go find its source."

"To go find its source . . ." It would be a great adventure. I said yes. A few months later in March 1987, I flew to Dhaka, beginning my journey. I would travel from the river's mouth in the Bay of Bengal north up through Assam, across the Himalayas to Tibet, and to the source.

I took a train down to Chittagong, going second class, with the windows open, feeling the country. I don't recall seeing any veiled women and only a few mosques. From there I took a boat out to Sandip, an island in the Bay of Bengal. A few years before, a tidal wave had swamped Sandip, killing thousands of people.

³⁴ *Bangladesh, A Portrait of Covert Genocide*, Woodhaven, New York: Bangladesh, Buddhist and Christian Charity Unity Council, February 2003, Preface, p. iii.

³⁵ *Time*, October 14, 2002.

A storm came up while we were at sea, and we couldn't dock so small boats came out to pick us up. A man handed me a child, and I took her arm, all I could reach, and passed her out over the water to those waiting below. Once on land, a dozen bicycle rickshaw drivers waited, anxious for a fare.

I didn't like having another man carry me. But if I walked, I deprived a man of money. I took the rickshaw, and he stood up, pumping his bicycle, the muscles in his legs as taut as a cable, as he pushed over the undulating dirt path towards a village.

I would tip him well. An Indian woman I would meet a few months later criticized me for tipping a taxi driver well. "They seek out foreigners. It is not fair for us."

It was a dilemma, but still I give to beggars. I feel better when I do. One of the tenets of Islam is to give alms to the poor. It is for the giver and the receiver and to bring the rich closer to the poor. The garbage in Dhaka must be the cleanest in the world because so many people constantly sift through it hunting for food, clothes, or something to sell.

Untold millions of Muslims in South Asia live on hope, their wits, and faith in God. They pray for rain, a good harvest, for healthy children, and to go to Heaven when they die. Only a few wage war. But they are committed.

Bangladesh was a mass of people all around me, mostly thin and small, the women elegant in beautiful brightly colored shawls and lungis; they walked straight in their villages from years of carrying loads on their heads; the men, especially those who hung onto the oars of our boat, their chests hard and bare and wiry like their arms and legs, as they strained, like galley slaves, against the waves, to bring us to shore. On Sandip, there were trees and grass, but few hills and nowhere to escape when the next wave came.

My guide, from the government, and I were walking through a village one evening. He pointed to a small house by itself. "I can't walk by there," he said. "I am in love with the woman who lives there. Our parents wouldn't let us marry. She is married to someone else. I wrote a novel about it." We took a different path. People are the same.

The next afternoon he took me to visit a girls' school and asked me to give a talk. The school was a small one-room wood hut, with four inches of sunlight between each board, and 20 young girls, with bright, happy faces, listening eagerly. They had nothing and were filled with such enthusiasm.

Ahmed said that Islamic militants had burned down 200 schools in Bangladesh. This girls' school would go up in smoke in five minutes.

As I traveled up river in Bangladesh, I walked through many villages of thatched-roof houses and swept dirt floors, and women, never veiled, carrying water jugs or working in the fields. Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Christians, all live in these villages, some side by side.

Once, near Dhaka by the river, I heard a mullah preaching in a mosque; his voice was loud, carrying over a loudspeaker. Outside there were thousands of people, women cooking over open fires or washing clothes, children beside them. Men were fishing or bathing in the river.

I never saw anyone praying, not like I did in Afghanistan where men prayed in the fields, by streams, and behind their rifles; or in Pakistan where men prayed in shops and on straw mats in the street outside of crowded mosques. I traveled through Assam, but don't recall seeing a mosque. People were friendly. Villages seemed peaceful.

In the north, Indian and Chinese soldiers were facing off again over the McMahon Line. When I reached Tibet, I watched a convoy one day of 100 black Chinese army trucks heading down towards the border.

Now, 20 years later, I am told that there are insurgent groups crossing the border from Bangladesh to northeast India. The United Liberation Front of Assam is growing stronger. Its leaders are said to use safe houses in Bangladesh. Ahmed said there are shiny new mosques in many villages, paid for by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Ahmed and Dutta said that Muslim NGOs from the Middle East, unlike American and European NGOs, do not have to register with the government. The U.S. recently closed down one, al-Haramain, for alleged ties to al-Qaeda.

I called a Jamaat-i-Islami member of parliament, a Jamaat editor at a newspaper, and the deputy secretary of Jamaat-i-Islami. The latter said he had the flu but could see me in two days. I would try again. Jamaat is linked to qaumi, meaning unlicensed madrassas, of which there are 15,000-20,000 in Bangladesh; at least 30-40 are run by former fighters from Afghanistan.³⁶

The next night I got a call from a former Catholic nun and human rights activist who had arranged for me to stay at Caritas. It was safe and had a library of materials on fundamentalism. She was scared. She said I had put Caritas in danger by talking about Islamic militancy.

The DGFI (Directorate General of Forces Intelligence) was looking for me. The DGFI, I had learned, is linked to the ISI. I had to be careful.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

She advised me to take a city bus, not a taxi, and go to a big hotel where I would be safer. She was right about the hotel. The DGFI had heard that I, a photojournalist, was “looking into Islamic militancy.” It was best that I left the country.

I packed quickly, took a rickshaw to a large hotel, wondering if I was being followed, if the soldiers at the hotel entrance had orders to stop me. I was worried that I had perhaps put people in danger. I took the first plane out the next morning back to India.

I wondered who, among those I had talked to, had talked to the DGFI. I hadn't mentioned to the Jamaat people that I had once worked for *National Geographic* in Bangladesh, but someone had told the police that I was a photojournalist. I am not.

Bangladesh has changed from when I was there 20 years before, following a river. Or maybe it was because I was looking into Islamic militancy.