

# BANGLADESH'S FRACTURE: POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

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## HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA AND THE PACIFIC OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

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## **BANGLADESH'S FRACTURE: POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM**

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**THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 2015**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA AND THE PACIFIC,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2 o'clock p.m., in room 2255 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Matt Salmon (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. SALMON. Good afternoon. The subcommittee will come to order. We often speak of the rebalance or pivot to Asia solely in terms of the large nations such as China and India.

But today we are going to turn our attention to Bangladesh, a nation that may be discussed less often than its larger neighbors but is nevertheless significant to our increased engagement in the region.

Today, we are going to discuss why it is critical that we keep a close eye on Bangladesh and why Bangladesh's security has significant bearing on regional security, thus on our efforts to rebalance.

But first, I would like to take a moment of silence for those whose lives were lost and destroyed in the tragic earthquake this past weekend, affecting so many in the nations of Nepal, India as well as Bangladesh.

Thank you. Okay. Bangladesh does have a unique story, a very inspirational one. A moderate voice in the Islamic world that is home to 166 million people with a Muslim majority, all within a geographic space the size of Iowa.

While roughly 80 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, we recognize the earnest advances that the country has made with consistent GDP growth averaging 6.2 percent over the last decade, something that we would love to have right now.

Bangladesh's fractious democracy is dominated by two competing political factions—the Awami League, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, currently in power, and Bangladesh National Party, or BMP, led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

These powerful leaders rule their parties like fiefdoms and corruption continues to be a major issue. Tensions between the two parties has often been high but since the most recent parliamentary elections in 2014 the escalation of violence between the two sides has been especially appalling.

Polarization between Awami League and BMP has reached new levels and politically motivated attacks have begun to target everyday people, including commuters and students.

We have seen assaults on journalists and horrific firebomb attacks on buses. Today, I hope to hear from our distinguished panelists about the violence committed by both parties to draw attention to this issue and make clear our state of disdain for the use of any type of violence as a means to convey a political message.

Both parties should know that democracy requires more than just lip service. If Bangladesh wants to refer to its own political system as a democracy it must be a democracy in substance.

But since the Awami League took power in January 2009, significant changes to the electoral process were made including the removal of independent and neutral caretaker government during elections.

This led to the boycott of the 2014 elections by the BMP and sparked the current spates of violence that we are seeing today. As it now stands, Bangladesh is in the midst of a serious political security crisis.

Just this past Tuesday, the BMP once again boycotted elections, this time at the municipal level citing polling irregularities. The U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh echoes our concerns saying, we are disappointed by widespread, first-hand and credible reports of vote rigging, intimidation and violence.

Incidents like this may lead to a further break down of order that could open space for Islamic militants or could force the military to take control once again.

Today, we will discuss both political and religious extremism. To be sure, there are links to draw between them. However, it is also important to distinguish between the actions attributable to political and religious violence.

Bangladesh has been a security partner in the combat against extremist terrorist groups as they currently have eight or more major Islamic extremist groups within their borders, many with ties to international terrorist networks.

In addition to tackling terrorism through law enforcement, Bangladesh also uses strategic communication to counter violent extremism especially among youth through Madrassas and other religious institutions.

Bangladesh is a current partner and a key partner in the struggle against Islamic extremism and we hope to continue this collective effort with Bangladesh and other valuable partners throughout the world. The Bangladesh government has also established the Rapid Action Battalion, or RAB, which has been very effective in counter terrorism efforts.

However, during changes in political power the two competing parties have been known to use the RAB for politically motivated attacks on the opposition.

We need to pay close attention to these types of junctures where a political crisis hampers the noble counter terror efforts in Bangladesh and do whatever possible to ensure that the domestic political turmoil does not negatively impact this critical mission.

At our hearing today, and as our committee continues to engage with the Asia Pacific, I hope our members keep in mind the significance of Bangladesh for the United States.

Bangladesh's geographic position at the crossroads of India, China and the rest of South Asia is of growing importance. For example, Bangladesh has long been a trading partner with the United States and we enjoy amiable trade relations through ongoing bilateral trade investment agreement.

We also have a strong interest in supporting our fellow—a fellow democracy, particularly in the Muslim world. What really is at stake in Bangladesh is the struggle for the ideological foundation of a nation between those that would emphasize secular ideas and Bengali ethnic identity and those that seek a firm Islamist ideology.

In Bangladesh there is great potential. We have the opportunity to support a society that embraces nonviolent competition and one that shirks religious extremism.

We should signal to the country that we support ideals such as respect for human dignity and freedom of expression no matter one's political disposition, creed or religion.

The people of Bangladesh deserve that. This is a timely discussion and I hope to gather valuable information and ideas today to better inform Congress' policy toward Bangladesh and I give my sincere thanks to my colleagues and our witnesses for joining me today, and I yield to the ranking member.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for remembering the people of Nepal at the beginning of this hearing.

Bangladesh is the second largest predominantly Muslim country in the world. It is also a country with a nearly 10 percent Hindu minority. A hundred and sixty-six million people of whom 60 million live in extreme poverty.

The United States needs to dedicate ourselves to human rights, democracy and economic development in Bangladesh and that includes support for those who will protect the workers who all too often we see in a particular disaster or a caved in building.

But we have to remember that there are still less spectacular destruction of ongoing poverty and labor abuse. It may not be the kind of scene that gets international press attention, but 60 million people living in extreme poverty deserve our attention.

And there are 200 labor unions in Bangladesh but we need to see more support for organizations that protect workers there and, of course, it is up to consumers to be aware of the effect of their consumption decisions.

We also have a stake in Bangladesh achieving a moderation and not being taken down the road of some would call it Islamic extremism, some would call it a corruption of Islam.

In particular, note that Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, the JMB group, has reportedly infiltrated from Bangladesh into border districts of India to make contacts with sympathizers and several madrassas focusing on recruitment and fund-raising.

It has sought to recruit 150 men to carry out attacks and sent 50 improvised explosives to Dhaka and Assam areas as the Islamic State has grown and we are seeing both it and al-Qaeda trying to bolster their ranks in Bangladesh.

In addition, Bangladesh faces a particular challenge because over 200,000 Rohingya from Burma, or Myanmar, have fled into Bangladesh, feeling persecution in their home country, and of course this creates an opening for the terrorist groups to try to recruit, to try to turn refugees into—exploit the anger and try to turn them into terrorists.

This is, of course, an ongoing problem and according to the *Hindustan Times*, pan-Islamic groups have attracted a few of these individuals, promising them to help carry out retribution against Myanmar.

The fact remains that Bangladesh's government and, of course, it is split and there we do have significant concerns about democracy there. But the Bangladeshi government has been a partner of the United States in fighting terrorism.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses as to how we can see a Bangladesh that protects its Hindu minority, that is a partner for us against Islamic extremist terrorism and is growing both economically and in terms of its dedication to democracy and human rights, and I yield back.

Mr. SALMON. Thank you, Ranking Member.

We are in the appropriations season and it is incredibly chaotic today. We are going to be called for a vote probably in the next 10 minutes and so I know that members want to make opening statements and I am trying to juxtapose everything today and I am going to deeply apologize that we are going to just limit the opening statements to myself and the ranking member just in the interests of time and I do want to get to the panel very badly.

That is why we are here, and for those members I deeply apologize. I thought we were going to have a little bit more flexibility today than we are having and this is so important.

So I would like to introduce the witnesses. We are very fortunate to have Lisa Curtis, a senior research fellow from Heritage Foundation's Asian Study Center, Dr. Ali Riaz—is it Riaz? Did I pronounce that right? Joins us from Illinois State University where he is chair of the Department of Politics and Government. Thank you.

Jay Kansara is here from the Hindu American Foundation where he is the director of government relations and I understand that you recently returned from Bangladesh, and Steven Fleischli, correct? Joins us from Bangladesh Trade and Relations Association where he is president, and Alissa Ayres joins us from the Council on Foreign Relations where she is a senior fellow for India, Pakistan and South Asia.

And without objection, the witnesses' full prepared statement will be made part of the record and members will have 5 calendar days to submit statements, questions and extraneous materials for the record.

Ms. Curtis.



**STATEMENT OF MS. LISA CURTIS, SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, ASIAN STUDIES CENTER, THE DAVIS INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY, THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION**

Ms. CURTIS. Yes, thank you very much for inviting me here to testify on Bangladesh—a very important issue. I commend your subcommittee for bringing this issue to everyone’s attention.

The political tensions between the ruling Awami League government and the BNP opposition are threatening to derail economic and social progress in the country and certainly the brutal murders of two liberal bloggers in the last 2 months has reminded us of the threat of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh and the possibility that extremists could take advantage of the current political unrest.

On January 5th, the opposition engaged in protest demonstrations. This was on the anniversary of the flawed national election of last year. The protests quickly turned violent and particularly disturbing was a series of petrol bombings on buses that killed or injured hundreds of innocent bystanders.

As many as 7,000 opposition activists have reportedly been detained in jail and 20 opposition supporters have allegedly died in extrajudicial circumstances. A senior opposition official, Salahuddin Ahmed, has reportedly disappeared from his home on March 10th after being taken by men who identified themselves as police.

Unfortunately, Tuesday’s municipal elections in Dhaka and Chittagong have also been marred by allegations of rigging and voter intimidation and the opposition pulled out of those elections midway through the process.

There had been hope that these municipal elections would help restore faith in the democratic process but instead they seem to have further vitiated the atmosphere between the government and the opposition.

The U.S. had previously held Bangladesh up as a model of a large Muslim country with a functioning democracy. Moreover, Bangladesh has made significant social and economic gains over the last decade.

Life expectancy has increased, infant mortality has decreased, female literacy has doubled and economic growth has averaged around 6 percent annually.

All of this is now at risk. The political unrest is occurring at the same time that the government is cracking down on the leading Islamist political party, the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The Jamaat is currently banned from participating in elections and its top leaders have either been executed or are facing death sentences for their roles in siding with Pakistani forces during Bangladesh’s 1971 war for independence.

Now, the trials of the Jamaat leaders have found some favor with a segment of the Bangladeshi population, especially the young urban middle class and we saw this during the Shahbag movement in 2013 when protestors gathered to object to what they considered overly lenient sentencing of those accused of war crimes.

Sheikh Hasina’s efforts to crack down on radical Islamists and to emphasize the secular principles of the country’s founding are certainly welcome.

But closing down the Jamaat entirely could backfire. The government should consider whether cracking down on peaceful avenues of political participation could reinforce the violent elements of Jamaat and therefore make the problem even worse.

So how can the U.S. help Bangladesh avoid further political unrest? First, I think the U.S. needs to be more proactive in encouraging dialogue between the government and the opposition and this includes being more vocal in criticizing both the opposition's violent tactics and the government's failure to provide adequate political space for the opposition.

Second, the U.S. should facilitate a civil society dialogue that involves the younger generation and is aimed at empowering local groups to advocate for nonviolent politics.

Such a dialogue could involve a variety of political, economic and religious civic organizations and could even involve the Jamaat-e-Islami younger members and emphasize the importance of respect for religious minorities and ensuring the political process is reflective of modern Bangladesh's achievement including the increase in Bangladeshi women's participation in the social, economic and political life of the country.

Thirdly, the U.S. should incentivize Sheikh Hasina to create the conditions for political stability through the prospect of greater U.S. trade and investment.

The U.S. is the biggest export market for Bangladesh. So, certainly, expanding those exports and attracting more U.S. investment is a goal for Dhaka and the U.S. should make clear that political stability returning to the country would encourage Washington to facilitate more trade delegations to the country.

There is much at stake in the political future of Bangladesh and the U.S. has to be more proactive in convincing the government and opposition to resolve differences through dialogue, noting that both political parties stand to suffer if political tensions continue.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Curtis follows:]



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*CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY*

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**Bangladesh's Fracture:  
Political and Religious Extremism**

Testimony before the  
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
United States House of Representatives

April 30, 2015

Lisa Curtis  
Senior Research Fellow, Asian Studies Center  
The Heritage Foundation

My name is Lisa Curtis. I am Senior Research Fellow on South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

The recent political turmoil in Bangladesh threatens to derail economic and social progress and set back democratic development in this pivotal nation with the fourth-largest Muslim population in the world. Islamist extremists have recently murdered two Bangladeshi journalists, raising concern that religious militants will take advantage of any prolonged political unrest. The U.S. must adopt a more assertive role in encouraging Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government and the leading opposition party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), headed by former prime minister Khaleda Zia, to pursue dialogue to break the political deadlock and restore stability.

On January 5, the one-year anniversary of the flawed election that brought Sheikh Hasina back to power, the BNP launched protest demonstrations under the slogan "Murder of Democracy Day." As part of the protests, the opposition called for a transport blockade, fueling street clashes that have killed more than 120 people in the last four months. Particularly disturbing was a series of petrol bombings on buses that killed or injured hundreds of innocent bystanders. Media reports indicate that as many as 7,000 opposition activists have been detained by the police and that 20 opposition supporters have allegedly died under extra-judicial circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Heritage Foundation is a public policy, research, and educational organization recognized as exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. It is privately supported and receives no funds from any government at any level, nor does it perform any government or other contract work.

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<sup>2</sup> Raza Rumi, "Bangladesh on the Brink," *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2015.

The recent round of protests and political violence has its roots in the 2014 elections that were marred by lack of opposition participation and an unusually low voter turn-out. The U.S. State Department issued a statement on January 6, 2014, expressing disappointment in the election process, and said that the results did not credibly represent the will of the Bangladeshi people.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. had previously held up Bangladesh as a model of a large Muslim country with a functioning democracy. Moreover, Bangladesh has made significant social and economic gains over the last decade. Life expectancy has increased by 10 years, infant mortality has decreased by nearly two-thirds, female literacy has doubled, and economic growth has averaged around 6 percent annually. But, with the country essentially under one-party rule for the last 16 months, the democratic process is under threat. Furthermore, the violent reaction from the opposition to Sheikh Hasina's increasingly autocratic approach to governing is putting social and economic progress at risk.

Bangladesh has held regular elections for the last 20 years—with one exception in 2007, when the military took power for nearly two years following escalating political violence and the failure of the political parties to agree on modalities for holding elections.

A similar scenario developed in 2013, when the Sheikh Hasina government refused to step down in favor of a neutral caretaker government during the election period. Prime Minister Hasina moved forward with the election without opposition participation. Half of the parliamentary seats went uncontested, and voter turnout was around 30 to 35 percent, significantly below the 86 percent turnout at the 2008 election. The Awami League won 232 of 300 parliamentary seats.

The Bangladeshi military has so far shown no indication that it will intervene to break the political deadlock as it did in 2007, although this could change if the situation deteriorates significantly. Sheikh Hasina has reportedly reduced chances of military involvement in politics by providing the Army a greater role in the economy.<sup>4</sup> Another motivating factor keeping the military out of politics is the battering that its image took from charges of corruption when it was in power in 2007 and 2008.

In June 2011, the Awami League government amended the constitution to abolish the caretaker system of government, which had been in place since 1996, although it failed to prevent pre-election violence and turmoil in the 2006 election. In May 2011, the Bangladeshi Supreme Court ruled that the caretaker government system should be retained for the next two parliamentary elections, a ruling that Sheikh Hasina ignored. Furthermore, an Asia Foundation survey conducted in September 2013 revealed that a large majority of Bangladeshis (77 percent) preferred that elections be held under a neutral interim administration, as in the past.

<sup>3</sup> News release, "Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh," U.S. Department of State, January 6, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/219331.htm> (accessed April 28, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Frederic Grare, "Is Bangladesh's Crisis About to Get Much Worse?" *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2015, at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/is-bangladeshs-crisis-about-to-get-much-worse/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

### **Human Rights Concerns**

The opposition protests and violent street clashes have led to a widespread government crackdown and reports of human rights violations by the Bangladeshi authorities. BNP Secretary General Salahuddin Ahmed has disappeared after being apprehended on March 10 by men identifying themselves as police.<sup>5</sup> The Bangladeshi police inspector general denied holding Ahmed in custody after his wife filed a habeas corpus writ in the High Court demanding the police produce her husband before a court.

A Bangladeshi civil rights group says it has documented the cases of 37 people that were killed by security forces in February, often after being taken into police custody. A separate human rights organization says 32 people were killed “extra-judicially” (including 22 killed in alleged “crossfire”) from January 5 to February 8, 2015.

### **Islamist Politics and Extremist Violence**

The leading Islamist political party, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), is currently banned from participating in elections, and its top leaders have either been executed or are facing death sentences for their roles in siding with Pakistani forces during Bangladesh’s 1971 war for independence.

In 2010, the Sheikh Hasina government established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to punish those responsible for crimes committed during the Bangladeshi independence movement. It is alleged that around three million Bengalis were killed, and over 200,000 women raped, by Pakistani security forces and their JeI supporters during the independence struggle. The International Crimes Tribunal Act of 1973 was originally passed to try nearly 200 alleged war criminals soon after Bangladesh gained independence. In a subsequent treaty signed between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, however, the alleged war criminals were pardoned. Previous Bangladeshi governments have avoided reviving the war crimes trials, fearing unanticipated repercussions.

The international human rights community has raised questions about the impartiality of the tribunal’s proceedings and whether Sheikh Hasina is using the tribunal as a tool against political opponents.<sup>6</sup> Supporters of Hasina say that the ICT is prosecuting the most violent war criminals in the country’s history.

The ICT trials have found favor with a large segment of the Bangladeshi population, especially the young urban middle class. The Shahbag movement is named after the square where people gathered in February 2013 to protest what they considered lenient sentencing of Abdul Qader Mollah, the first defendant prosecuted by the tribunal. Mollah was a leader in the JeI’s youth organization in 1971. After he was sentenced to life in

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Barry, “Amid Political Confrontations in Bangladesh, a Search for a Missing Opposition Official,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> “Bangladesh: Azam Conviction Based on Flawed Proceedings,” Human Rights Watch, August 16, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/16/bangladesh-azam-conviction-based-flawed-proceedings> (accessed April 29, 2015).

prison, young protesters took to the streets and demanded reconsideration of the court's decision and the imposition of the death penalty. The protesters further demanded an official ban on the JeI and all Islamist extremist groups.

In August 2013, the Dhaka High Court declared the JeI's political party registration illegal on grounds that its charter does not recognize parliament as the sole institution to pass laws and because it bars non-Muslims and women from leading the party. In November 2013, in agreement with the High Court verdict, Election Commissioner Shah Nawaz declared that the party could not participate in the national elections.

The government followed through on the Shahbag protesters' demands on December 12, 2013, and executed senior JeI leader Abdul Qader Mollah, provoking rioting among Islamists that led to five deaths in a 24-hour period. Two weeks ago, the government executed another senior JeI leader, Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, for war crimes including rape, torture, and murder. International human rights organizations urged Bangladesh not to carry out the execution, arguing that the trial procedures did not meet international standards. Following the execution of Kamaruzzaman, the State Department issued a statement condemning the action but also noting progress in the ICT process and the "judicial rigor" applied to the Kamaruzzaman court ruling.<sup>7</sup>

The JeI has a small support base mostly in rural areas. It won between 4 percent and 5 percent of the vote in the 2008 elections. The JeI's youth organization has branches nationwide and is an effective recruitment arm for the political party, but has a reputation for militancy and provoking violent clashes with opposing groups. When the BNP ruled the country from 2001 to 2006, it formed an alliance with the JeI, allowing JeI members to hold cabinet positions for the first time.

The JeI has been responsible for numerous attacks against religious minority communities in Bangladesh. Most recently, in the run-up to the January 5 election, Islamists torched hundreds of Hindu homes, injuring scores. When the JeI was part of the governing coalition from 2001 to 2006, Islamists initiated a campaign against the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh and demanded that the government declare them non-Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

In the backdrop of the political turmoil and ongoing war crimes trials, the country continues to face a threat from Islamist extremists. There is some fear that the violent Islamists will take advantage of the political unrest to push their agenda. These fears were compounded in late February when Bangladeshi-American activist and liberal commentator Avijit Roy was hacked to death by Islamists in the streets of Dhaka.

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<sup>7</sup>New release, "Statement on the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) Death Sentence of Kamaruzzaman," U.S. Department of State, April 11, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240591.htm> (accessed April 28, 2015).

<sup>8</sup>The Ahmadiyya movement has approximately 10 million followers in the world, and makes up less than 1 percent of the Bangladeshi population. Toward the end of the 19th century, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), founder of Ahmadiyya, broke with centuries-old Islamic dogma by claiming to be an Islamic prophet. (Mainstream Muslims believe that Mohammed was the last prophet.)

Another liberal blogger, Washiqur Rahman, was similarly murdered by Islamists in late March.

The emergence of a new extremist group, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which draws inspiration from the global jihadist movement, has further raised concerns that al-Qaeda is seeking to exploit the increasingly volatile politics in Bangladesh. The existence of ABT was revealed after the arrests of five Bangladeshi students in the February 2013 murder of secular blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, who had played a key role in organizing peaceful street protests against the Islamist agenda.<sup>9</sup> ABT members were reportedly influenced by al-Qaeda materials that had been translated into Bengali. Bangladeshi police say the group has been around for several years but has little organizational structure. On August 12, 2013, ABT leader Mufti Jasmuddin Rahmani and 30 of his followers were arrested.

Two years ago, violent protests over the death sentence for a senior Jel leader killed nearly 150. Hefazat-e-Islam (Protectors of Islam), a coalition of radical Islamist organizations that run madrassas throughout the country, marched on Dhaka in May 2013 to protest death sentences for Islamist leaders. Hefazat-e-Islam also issued a 13-point charter calling for banning the mixing of women and men, instituting a harsh new blasphemy law, declaring the minority Ahmadis non-Muslims, and making Islamic education mandatory at the primary and secondary level.

During her previous term in office (December 2008–January 2014), Sheikh Hasina was proactive in cracking down on radical Islamists and in emphasizing the secular principles of the country's founding. Three years ago, the Supreme Court restored Bangladesh's status as a secular—as opposed to Islamic—republic.<sup>10</sup> The Hasina government successfully dismantled one of the deadliest groups, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which carried out several attacks in 2005 and 2006.<sup>11</sup> The law enforcement and intelligence agencies have also acted aggressively against extremists, leading to arrests and disruptions of terrorist plots.

Given Jel's violent record, the government's concerns about the group are justified, but it should also consider that cracking down on peaceful avenues of political participation could have the effect of reinforcing Jel's violent tendencies and make the problem worse. Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary-general of Citizens for Good Governance, recently commented in a *Wall Street Journal* article that, "If all avenues of political discourse are

<sup>9</sup>Shahriar Sharif, "New Extremist Group Causes Headache in Bangladesh," KhabarSouthAsia.com, April 3, 2013, [http://khabarsouthasia.com/en\\_GB/articles/apwi/articles/features/2013/04/03/feature-02](http://khabarsouthasia.com/en_GB/articles/apwi/articles/features/2013/04/03/feature-02) (accessed April 28, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Sadanand Dhume, "Bangladesh's Good Fight against Islamism," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Manceza Hossain and Lisa Curtis, "Bangladesh: Checking Islamist Extremism in a Pivotal Democracy," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2383, March 15, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/03/bangladesh-checking-islamist-extremism-in-a-pivotal-democracy> (accessed April 29, 2015).



closed, Islamist parties that are part of electoral politics here could renounce the political system and become our Taliban.”<sup>12</sup>

Supporters of Sheikh Hasina’s agenda against the JeI say it will give Bangladeshi secularism a chance to grow roots and create a model of a Muslim-majority state defined more by language and culture than by faith.<sup>13</sup>

### Political Unrest Taking Economic Toll

The political unrest is hampering Bangladesh’s economic outlook. The garment industry—which makes up 75 percent of the country’s exports—is already poised to take a hit. Delivery schedules have been disrupted and investor confidence has dipped due to the political tumult. Garment buyers are starting to shift their orders to countries like Indonesia because of the political tensions and instability in Bangladesh. A recent World Bank report states that the Bangladeshi economy suffered losses of around \$2.2 billion (1 percent of GDP) as a result of the political violence that rocked the country in January and February.<sup>14</sup>

Bangladesh has made remarkable economic gains in the last decade. Exports have risen from \$6.5 billion in 2000 to over \$30 billion in 2014, largely because of growth in the garment industry, which employs over four million women and has turned Bangladesh into a global exporter of ready-made clothing, second only to China. Bangladesh is on a path to becoming a middle-income country within the next decade and of achieving food self-sufficiency by 2020. More Bangladeshi girls attend school than in neighboring countries and, according to the Legatum Prosperity Index, Bangladesh has surpassed India in terms of quality of life because of longer life spans, lower levels of undernourishment, lower rates of infant mortality, and better access to sanitation facilities.<sup>15</sup>

While Bangladesh’s economic progress is commendable, serious challenges remain. Thirty percent of Bangladeshis live below the poverty line—including much of the workforce responsible for the recent economic growth. The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in April 2013 that killed over 1,100 workers shows that attention to worker and building safety regulations and compliance have not kept pace with higher rates of economic growth. Bangladesh will risk facing more garment-factory tragedies

<sup>12</sup> Syed Zain Al-Mahmood, “Amid Political Chaos, Bangladesh Fears a Rise in Militancy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Conversation with Sadanand Dhume, Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute.

<sup>14</sup> “Political turmoil cost Bangladesh \$2.2 billion in three months of 2015: World Bank,” *bdnews24.com*, April 12, 2015, at <http://bdnews24.com/economy/2015/04/12/political-turmoil-cost-bangladesh-2.2-billion-in-three-months-of-2015-world-bank> (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> “Bangladesh Overtakes India in Overall Prosperity,” *The Daily Star*, November 4, 2013, <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/bangladesh-overtakes-india-in-overall-prosperity/> (accessed April 29, 2015).

until it works with international stakeholders and makes a concerted effort to improve safety.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Recommendations:**

The U.S. must take a more active role in discouraging further political unrest in Bangladesh, which is undermining the country's social and economic prospects and runs the risk of being exploited by Islamist radicals to forward their agenda of overturning the democratic process. Prolonged political deadlock or escalating street violence could also lead to another military coup along the lines of what occurred in 2007. In either scenario, both the Awami League and BNP would suffer. To avoid either of these outcomes, the U.S. should:

- **Work with like-minded democratic countries to foster dialogue between the Awami League and BNP camps to reduce political tensions.** The U.S. should work with other countries that take a neutral position on Bangladeshi politics—such as the U.K., Canada, Australia, South Korea, and Japan—to convince Sheikh Hasina to initiate a genuine dialogue with BNP leaders aimed at restoring a peaceful democratic process.

The U.S. should also coordinate efforts with India, although so far New Delhi has seemed unwilling to use its influence with Sheikh Hasina to convince her to reach out to the opposition. Indian leaders seem to calculate that their interests are better served with the Awami League in power and thus they have been reluctant to pressure Hasina to provide political space to the BNP. New Delhi's position, however, may be short-sighted. If Sheikh Hasina faces little or no international resistance to her increasingly authoritarian approach to governing, Bangladeshi politics will almost certainly turn increasingly violent and radical Islamist groups will more easily gain recruits.

- **Be more vocal in criticizing both the opposition's violent tactics and the government's failure to provide adequate political space for the opposition.** The U.S. should press the Hasina government either to release the thousands of detained opposition activists currently in jail or to move forward with their cases, according to due process of law. It is necessary to bring to justice those responsible for killing innocent bystanders, especially the victims of the unprecedented petrol bombings. The U.S. must also raise its concerns about disappeared BNP political leader Salahuddin Ahmed, and call on the government to prioritize his safe return to his family.
- **Encourage a civil society dialogue on the future of Bangladeshi politics and democracy that involves the younger generation and is aimed at empowering**

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Curtis and Manceza Hossain, "Combating Islamism in South Asia: Keeping Bangladesh on the Democratic Path," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2870, December 20, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/12/combating-islamism-in-south-asia-keeping-bangladesh-on-the-democratic-path> (accessed April 29, 2015).

**local groups to advocate for non-violent politics.** Such a dialogue should involve a variety of political, economic, and religious civic organizations and individuals without political affiliations. Through conferences and meetings, the U. S. should encourage discussion among the various civil society groups on strengthening the democratic process and countering violent extremism. The dialogue could include young Jel leaders, who would be encouraged to reform the party by firmly opposing violence, respecting the rights of religious minorities, and reflecting modern Bangladeshi society's achievements, including the increase in women's participation in the social, economic, and political life of the country.

- **Incentivize Sheikh Hasina's government to create conditions for political stability through the prospect of greater U.S. trade and investment.** The U.S. represents Bangladesh's biggest export market, and expanding those export markets and attracting more U.S. investment into the country are important goals for Dhaka. The U. S. should make clear that, as political stability returns to the country, Washington will encourage and facilitate trade and investment delegations to the country.

#### **Conclusion:**

Political deadlock between the ruling Awami League and BNP opposition is threatening economic and social progress and opening the door for Islamist extremists to gain more recruits and increase their influence in the country. The U.S., in coordination with other interested democratic partners, must seek to convince the two sides to resolve their differences through dialogue, noting that both political parties stand to suffer if political tensions continue or worsen.

Mr. SALMON. Thank you.

Dr. Riaz, I think that you will probably be the last one that testifies before we end up having to go vote if the vote schedule stays the way it has been predicted.

So could you go ahead and make a statement? And then if that is—we will probably get buzzed, you know, while you are speaking but we will wait until you conclude to leave.

Thank you. And it won't be that we left because we didn't like what you said.

**STATEMENT OF MR. ALI RIAZ, PH.D., PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT CHAIR, ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY**

Mr. RIAZ. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member—Congressman Sherman and the committee. Thank you for the invitation to discuss the political situation in Bangladesh.

In the past 1½ years, Bangladeshi politics has experienced a tumultuous period. The period is marked by two episodes of heightened violence—that is in late 2013 and early 2015, a flawed national election in 2014, unremitting heavy-handed actions by the government between 2013 and 2015 and highly-rigged city corporation elections and actions which took place in 28th of February, 2015, all of which raised serious concerns regarding the future trajectory of the country's political, particularly the prospects of democracy.

The uncertainty that has gripped the nation since 2011 has not disappeared. It is the absence of the trust among the major political parties, lack of consensus on the modus operandi of holding an inclusive national election and dearth of institutions to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens including exercising the right to vote freely that together sustains this uncertainty.

In the past 3 years, a number of disturbing trends have emerged which reflect the sorry state of the human rights situation in the country. In recent years and particularly since 2014, the restrictions on freedom of assembly, movement and speech have shrunk the democratic space significantly. Violence and intimidation have become the primary modes of political expression.

The belligerent rhetoric of the ruling party and its supporters contributed to the likelihood of the emergence of regimented system of governance akin to authoritarianism.

Unrestrained use of force on the part of the government along with the high degree of surveillance, growing number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances have created a culture of fear.

The opposition parties, particularly the major opposition, BNP, have either participated or encouraged violence as a principal means to press for its demands for a fresh national election. The nature and scope of violence has changed for worse.

Innocent citizens have been targeted. It is evident that the opposition's tactics have failed to mobilize citizens in its support. There have been no public inquiries to find the perpetrators of these arson attacks and bring them to justice.

The government ruling party and the regime supporters have tried to justify severe measures in the name of restoration of peace

and stability at the expense of democracy in general and particularly the fundamental rights of the citizens. Furthermore, the regime supporters have also argued that economic development should be privatized over democracy.

Both are highly discredited approaches and should be noted in earnest. The relentless belligerent posturing have contributed to the polarization of this society and encouraged extremists rhetoric, resulting in further violence.

This allows non-state actors to take advantage of the situation and pursue their radical agenda. The brutal murders of bloggers Rajib Haider in 2013, Avijit Roy and Washiqur Rahman in 2015 demonstrate that political uncertainty, heightened violence and absence of the rule of law provides the environment in within which militants can fester and become a threat to society.

These incidents also show that the country has become a dangerous place for those who dare to make critical comments about Islam. Islamist militants groups such as Ansarullah Bangla Team or Harkat-ul Jihadal Islam find opportunity when the state's security apparatuses lose their focus.

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable success since 2007 in curbing militancy. But democracy deficit, recurrence of violence within mainstream politics and state repression may undermine this achievement.

Now what can be done? I would quote Professor Rehman Siobhan, a scholar of Bangladesh—"Move to restore predictability to the lives of the people has to move forward through the political process rather than dependence on street violence or the coercive power of the state. The end result must be a political settlement which recreates a more inclusive political order underwritten by a fairly acquired democratic mandate."

To achieve these goals, it is imperative, number one, steps are taken to ensure a fairly acquired democratic mandate for governance.

Erosion of fundamental rights must be stopped and democratic space for democratic constitutional parties are restored, freedom of assembly, movement and speech guaranteed in the constitution be adhered in essence and to the letter, unaccountable and excessive use of state's coercive power including extrajudicial killing and enforced disappearance be brought to an end.

All parties, including the opposition parties, unequivocally denounce violence as a means to achieve political goals and, finally, institutions to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens including exercising the right to vote freely be restored.

With that, I think at this point the United States and the international community has a responsibility to ensure that these things are done and done in a fairly manner so that Bangladesh should not be running into a spiral which would take it in a downward slope.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Riaz follows:]

Congressional Testimony

**BANGLADESH'S FRACTURE:  
POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM**

Testimony before the  
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
United States House of Representatives  
April 30, 2015

**Ali Riaz**  
Professor and Chair  
Department of Politics and Government  
Illinois State University  
Normal, IL

Chairman Salmon and Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to discuss the political situation in Bangladesh.

In the past year and a half Bangladeshi politics has experienced a tumultuous and puzzling period. The period is marked by two episodes of heightened violence (late 2013, early 2015), a flawed national election (2014), unremitting heavy handed actions by the government (2013-15), and highly rigged city corporations elections (28 April 2015) – all of which raise serious concerns regarding the future trajectory of the country's politics, particularly the prospects for democracy. Although 2014 was a year of relative peace, the uncertainty that has gripped the nation since 2011 hasn't disappeared. It is the absence of trust among major political parties, lack of a consensus on the modus operandi of holding an inclusive national election, and the dearth of institutions to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens, including exercising the right to vote freely, that together undergirds this uncertainty.

Against this background the fundamental questions are: whether the nation will continue to tread the path of 'living dangerously'?; What's to be done?; What are the future trajectories?; and What, if any, role can the international community play?

Answers to these questions necessitate reviewing the major events of the past year and a half and identifying the current state of affairs of Bangladeshi politics.

#### **Violence, a Flawed Election and a Year of Relative 'Calm'**

Prior to the elections in early 2014, the country was wracked by violence for months. The opposition parties, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led alliance, demanded the restoration of the caretaker government proviso in the constitution to oversee the election. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the ruling AL rejected this as unconstitutional, pointing out that elections in other parliamentary systems normally go forward without recourse to interim caretaker arrangements. The ruling party insisted that holding the election was imperative for constitutional continuity. The BNP took to the streets; general strikes and blockades ensued while the government responded with force, arrested the BNP leaders, and put Khaleda Zia under virtual house arrest. Several spates of violence throughout the year cost at least 500 lives, according to Human Rights groups. The UN-mediated negotiation between two parties failed. Immediately before the election the PM promised that negotiations will resume after the election for an early election of the next parliament if the BNP end the violence agitations and sever its alliance with the Islamist party Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI), which played an active role against the war of independence in 1971 and some of leaders of the party were being tried for war crimes.

The election, held on 5 January 2014, delivered a landslide victory to the incumbent alliance as only 12 of 40 registered parties participated. Some of these parties represented only a handful of candidates. The Jatiya Party (JP) led by former dictator H M Ershad was coerced into

participating. More than half of the members of parliament— 153 out of 300—were the only candidates for their seats, practically disenfranchising more than 50 percent of the voters. The overall voter turnout was at an historic low. However, the BNP failed to mount a popular mobilization against the government in the days leading up to the vote and stop the election from being held. This is due to its lack of organizational capacity, and its alliance (perhaps reliance on), the BJI. With the inclusion of the JP in the new cabinet, which was also officially designated the 'opposition party', the parliament has turned into a de facto one-party institution with no institutional checks.

Soon after the election, the BNP called off its agitation programs. Subsequently, Khaleda Zia insisted that the BNP's alliance with the BJI is tactical, instead of ideological. The PM and the ruling party reneged on their promise to hold negotiations for a new election and declared their intention to serve a full term until 2019. Elections to the Upa Zilla (Sub-District) Councils, the second lowest tier of elected local administration, were held in February through May. Although these elections are officially held on a 'non-partisan' basis, contestants typically represent various political parties. Elections to 457 councils were held in five phases between February and May 2014. The first two phases were held fairly without any large-scale interference of the ruling party activists and the Election Commission demonstrated significant neutrality. The opposition supported candidates for the council Chairmen were elected in large numbers (out of 212 seats 93 went to the BNP, 78 to the AL, and 21 to the BJI supported candidates). But intimidation of opposition candidates, vote rigging, capture of polling centers by ruling party activists' marred the subsequent phases and the EC turned a blind eye to these irregularities resulting in the victory of the AL candidates in large numbers ( out of 245 seats, 145 went to the AL, 65 to the BNP, and 15 to the BJI). The result demonstrated that the EC has failed overall to maintain its neutrality.

Throughout 2014 the country enjoyed relative peace and stability while the opposition leaders faced persecution. Cases against opposition leaders, at times frivolous, were filed. Cases against BNP leader Khaleda Zia were revived and/or proceedings started.

#### **The Return of the Violence**

The situation took a turn for the worse in early 2015, when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) called for demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the controversial election and press for the demand to hold elections under a neutral government. The BNP-led alliance was denied the opportunity to hold a public rally and the BNP leader Khaleda Zia was confined at the party office, the BNP launched general strikes and imposed a countrywide blockade which unleashed violence. Numerous incidents of throwing homemade petrol bombs and burning public transport, especially public buses with passengers inside, took place. The government blamed the BNP for orchestrating these incidents while the BNP alleged that they were carried out by the ruling party activists to defame the opposition movement. Although arrests of some ruling party activists with homemade bombs similar to the ones used in the arson attacks gave some credence to the BNP's allegation, there was very little doubt that most attacks were made by



BNP supporters and activists of the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI). In the initial days of the movement the regime and the ruling party showed nervousness. But the abject failure of the BNP to show any public mobilization (such as rallies, public demonstrations) gradually weakened its claim to enjoy public support. Their tactics, if not the demand, lost appeal. The conspicuous absence of the BNP leaders in the political scene raised skepticism about the goal while Khaleda Zia and her confidants continued to claim success. Over time, the party seemed to lose grip of the movement and it appeared to be a series of sporadic violent activities. The popular perception that the actions were conducted under the instructions of Tarek Rahman, son of Khaleda Zia with a checkered past who is in self-imposed exile in London, didn't help the party either.

Law enforcing agencies were given a free hand in dealing with opposition activists. Overall, 138 people died in the violence that gripped the country for 91 days. Of these 74 died in incidents of bomb attacks or burning vehicles, 10 died in clashes with either law enforcement agencies (such as the police, the Rapid Action Battalion, and the Bangladesh Border Guards) or between supporters of the government and the opposition. At least 37 people were killed in 'crossfire'/'encounters' – official descriptions used to justify extrajudicial killings by the law enforcement agencies.

The government's decision to resort to harsh tactics, including arresting opposition leaders and the deaths of activists at the hands of law enforcement forces, exacerbated the situation. According to human rights groups at least 15,000 people, mostly opposition activists, were arrested and many of them have been detained without any charges. Deaths from political violence, clashes between the members of the law enforcing agencies and opposition activists, and extra-judicial killings perpetrated by the law enforcing agencies continue to mount. Repeated calls from the international community and members of the civil society within Bangladesh for a dialogue to address the political impasse have been rejected by the ruling party. The opposition also declined to scale down its agitation.

By the time the three month long agitation and violence came to an end, the country had already suffered heavy losses – in terms of the economy \$2.2 Billion, almost 1 percent of its GDP growth; public examinations for students had to be postponed several times and educational institutions lost school days creating disarray in the academic calendar.

### **Worrying Trends**

In the past three years, a number of disturbing trends have emerged which threaten the personal safety and security of citizens and reflect the sorry state of the Human Rights situation in the country. Two deserve special attention: extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.

According to Human Rights Group *Ain O Salish Kendra* (ASK), extrajudicial killings by various law enforcing agencies have become commonplace since 2004, the year the elite Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) was founded. Over time a pattern has emerged that shows that the RAB has

targeted political activists. In 2009, the number of people killed stood at 229. In 2010, 133 people were killed either in crossfire or while in custody. In 2012 the number declined to 91 but rose to 208 in 2013. In 2014, despite the absence of any anti-government movement, at least 154 people were killed, 54 of them died while in police custody. The group further reports that in the first three months of 2015, law enforcement agencies have killed 64 people in separate incidents of 'crossfire'. Despite well documented incidents, the government continued to deny the extrajudicial killings. It is also worth noting that during the episodes of violence in 2013 and 2015, the government had deployed the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and created joint forces comprising various law enforcement agencies to address political unrest and violence; often members of these forces used such heavy-handedness that many believe their actions can be considered unlawful. Importantly, in early 2015 as the opposition launched its blockade program and violence engulfed the country, comments of ruling party leaders including the Prime Minister had given an impression that their actions were preemptively indemnified. The Attorney General, on 3 February 2015, said the officers should instantly retaliate by shooting at those who throw bombs at transport convoys (<http://newagebd.net/92335/ag-urges-law-enforcers-to-shoot-at-arsonists/#sthash.i4bZ5MjG.4wNv7MlX.dpbs>). High ranking officials of law enforcement agencies made highly provocative comments. Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of the Dhaka Range police, on 7 February, referring to suspected arsonists said, "Not only shall you fire at them but their family members too should be annihilated. I give you this order and the liability is mine" (<http://www.observerbd.com/2015/02/08/71390.php>). On 4 February the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of the Chittagong range police said the force has "the capability to avenge one killing with two" (<http://www.observerbd.com/2015/02/04/70614.php>). It is worth recalling that of the 64 people named in the extra judicial killings in the first three months of 2015, 24 of them died at the hands of the members of the police force.

The second phenomenon is abduction or enforced disappearance. It has increased dramatically since 2010. Reports by relatives and friends of individuals abducted by plain-clothed members of law enforcing agencies, including the elite force named Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and/or supporters of the regime demonstrate the extent of the practice. The Government denies any involvement either on the part of the police or the RAB. According to Odhikar, there were three incidents of enforced disappearances in 2009, 18 in 2010, 30 in 2011, and 24 in 2012. According to ASK, 53 disappeared in 2013. It documented 229 enforced disappearances between 2010 and 2013. The number increased dramatically after the controversial election in 2014. In the first four months of 2014, at least 53 people disappeared; the number increased to 88 by the end of the year. Dead bodies of a number of people have been discovered after a long period. These dead bodies bore marks of torture and execution. According to the ASK, between January and March 2015, family members and relatives of the victims informed them that 25 people were picked up by the members of law enforcement agencies either in plainclothes or claiming to be members of a law enforcement agency.

Two recent incidents illustrate the nature of these abductions. Joint Secretary General of the BNP and former Deputy Minister Salah Uddin Ahmed was allegedly picked up by members of the law enforcement agency on 10 March 2015 from a house where he had been in hiding since the BNP-led agitation began in January 2015. He was acting as the BNP spokesperson as most of the senior leaders were incarcerated and were operating clandestinely after the party central office was locked up by the police. Eyewitness accounts including of the security guard gathered by Human Rights groups and media revealed that men in plain clothes claiming to be members of law enforcement agencies had picked him up at night. His chauffeur and personal staff were arrested days before. The police didn't want to register his wife's case as Salah Uddin is a missing person. Despite the High Court issuing a ruling to the government to produce him at court, the government hasn't complied.

On February 23, 2015 at around 3:30 am, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, the Convener of Nagorik Oikya, a small political party but vocal critic of the government, was picked up by a group of men who said they were members of the DB police, from a residence in Dhaka. Police denied that he had been arrested, but his family filed a case. Almost 21 hours later, he was handed over to police by the RAB who claimed to have arrested him at around 11:00 pm on February 23, from a street in Dhaka. He was then charged with allegedly instigating the Army to mutiny. These recent incidents like others before them show that the regime loyalists (and law enforcement agencies) enjoy impunity which contributes to the increasing number of such incidents. Concurrent to these is the significant increase in vendetta and vigilante justice. Often they are committed by hired guns. This has contributed to the growing incidence of gruesome murders.

Some events have already laid bare the connections between abductions, extrajudicial killings and law enforcement agencies. A glaring example is the abduction and murders of seven people in Narayanganj, a city located southeast of capital. On 27 April 2014, seven people, including a ward commissioner of the city corporation, Nazrul Islam, and his lawyer, Chandan Sarkar, were abducted while they were returning home after a court appearance. Their mutilated dead bodies were found in a nearby river a few days later. It was alleged that the local RAB commander, a relative of an influential cabinet member, had taken bribes from the rival AL leader for the abduction and killing. Popular outrage and press reports led to the retirement of three RAB officials, including the commander of the unit, Lt-Col Sayeed Tareq. Other allegations against him also surfaced. The High Court, in response to a writ petition filed by Kamal Hossain (an eminent lawyer and opposition leader) ordered the Government to take them into custody. The Prime Minister expressed annoyance with the writ and after several days the RAB officers were arrested. As of early April 2015 police have pressed charges against 35 individuals including 19 RAB or former RAB officials.

Violence has been a part of Bangladeshi politics for long. But the nature and scope of political violence has changed for the worse in the past year and a half. We have witnessed that common citizens, with no political affiliations, have become targets of attacks. Incidents of

arson and throwing homemade petrol bombs at public transports during the period between January and April in 2015 were rampant and not only cost 74 lives but also maimed hundreds. Public outcry against these attacks notwithstanding, there have been tendencies to justify them on the one hand while taking political advantage of these crimes, on the other. There have been no public inquiries to find the perpetrators and bring them to justice. These failures will only encourage recurrence in future. It is also worth noting with great concern that in each episode of violence the minority communities, especially the members of the Hindu communities, have become victims and the state has miserably failed to protect them.

It is a public knowledge in Bangladesh that the government has increased surveillance over private citizens and political leaders. The legality of the measures employed is unclear. Press reports have shown that although surveillance equipment was procured by the intelligence agencies to enhance their capability to monitor and fight militant groups, they are now allegedly being used against political opponents and critics of the government. According to media reports, Swiss authorities recently seized a consignment of surveillance equipment purchased by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in response to the reports of human rights violations. On several occasions telephone and Viber communications between political leaders have been made public and broadcast by pro-government media. The first major incident was the broadcast of the telephone conversation between the Prime Minister Hasina and BNP leader Khaleda Zia in November 2013. Since then there have been several other instances. Interestingly, the government has shown no interest in exploring how the media acquired the recordings.

Additionally, the newly enacted National Broadcasting Policy (2014) has imposed several restrictions on the content of reporting and advertisement on 46 government approved media channels. The infamous proviso of the Information and Communication Act (Article 57) has been used to prosecute at least one person and remains a threat to free speech. An owner of a TV channel was arrested and charged with a pornography case in which he was not initially included. The Editors Council, an organization of editors of newspapers, complained that the government is infringing on freedom of the press. The Prime Minister criticized the Daily Star for publication of a poster of a proscribed Islamist group and threatened action against its editor Mahfuz Anam. A number of cases have been filed against Matiur Rahman, the editor of the most widely circulated Bengali daily newspaper, by pro-government activists.

#### **Shrinking of Democratic Space and Consequences**

These events and trends clearly reveal that in recent years, and particularly since the beginning of 2014, restrictions on freedom of assembly, movement and speech have shrunk the democratic space significantly. Violence and intimidation has become the primary modes of political expression. The belligerent rhetoric of the ruling party and its supporters contributed to the likelihood of the emergence of a regimented system of governance akin to authoritarianism. Unrestrained use of force on the part of the government, along with the high degree of surveillance, growing number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances

have created a culture of fear. The opposition parties, particularly the major opposition BNP, have either participated in or encouraged violence as the principal means to press for its demand for a fresh national election. Unfortunately that has been used by the government as an excuse to clamp down further on dissenting voices.

The shrinking of the democratic space is also evidenced in the incessant attacks on members of the civil society. Vilification of citizens who are critical to the regime and who offer solutions to political crises has not only become a common practice among political activists but unfortunately has received support from high ranking members of the ruling party and the government. The extreme polarization has affected the civil society too. Many members of the civil society now act as spokespersons of the parties. Schisms along party lines have made most of the professional organizations ineffective. The small number of people who have taken upon themselves the task of being neutral and conscientious have become targets of derision and verbal assault.

The government, ruling party and the regime supporters have tried to justify severe measures in the name of restoration of peace and stability at the expense of democracy in general and particularly the fundamental rights of citizens. Furthermore, the regime supporters have also argued that economic development should be prioritized over democracy. They have alluded to Malaysia as a model in this regard - a party which has been ruling the country for decades with an abysmal Human Rights record and which has offered a very limited space for opposition political parties, but delivered economic growth.

As Bangladesh aspires to be a middle income country by 2021, the ruling party insists that continuity of economic policies and political stability are *sine qua non* for achieving the goal. The government's policy to expedite large development projects (for example, the Padma Bridge, the coal fired electricity generation project in Rampal), at times ignoring environmental concerns, provides the impression that it would like to create 'icons of development' to demonstrate the effectiveness of the current political strategy. Space and scope will not allow me to go into detail about the inadequacy of pitting democracy against development argument; three points suffice: first, the country's economic growth and successes in social indicators since 1991 were not regime-dependent, the upward trajectory continued despite alterations in power; second, the central challenges to development are corruption and absence of good governance which increase in the absence of checks and balances and due accumulation of absolute power in a few hands; third, the stability of the country is dependent on major parties (ie., the AL and the BNP) having access to power and economic rents it accrues through governance. These realities, whether one likes it or not, are not likely to change soon.

This kind of attitude and relentless belligerent posturing have contributed to the polarization of the society, and encouraged extremist rhetoric resulting in further violence. This allows non-state actors to take advantage of the situation and pursue their radical agenda. The brutal murders of the self-proclaimed atheist bloggers, Rajib Haider in 2013, and Avishek Roy and Washiqur Rahman in 2015, demonstrate that political uncertainty, heightened violence and

absence of the rule of law provides the environment within which militants can fester and become a threat to society. These murders are believed to have been committed by militant Islamist groups. A group known as 'Ansarullah Bangla 7' (affiliated to the militant group the Ansarullah Bangla Team – ABT) claimed responsibility for the murders of Avishek Roy and Washiqur Rahman. It is of great concern that nobody is yet to be tried for these murders and previous attacks on online activists. These incidents also show that the country has become a dangerous place for those who dare to make critical comments about Islam. Islamist militant groups such as the ABT (and Harkat-ul Jihadal Islam Bangladesh) find opportunity when the state security apparatuses lose their focus. Bangladesh has achieved remarkable success since 2007 in curbing militancy; but democracy deficit, recurrence of violence within mainstream politics, and state repression may undermine these achievements. Anti-terrorism strategies and measures should be guided by national security interests rather than immediate political gains.

The supporters of the ruling party argue that a classic democratic process, which offers the potential of victory for the BNP-led alliance will derail the war crimes trials. Therefore, it is necessary to shed some light on the ongoing war crimes trials and its implications.

#### **International Crimes Tribunal**

The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), established in 2010, to try those who committed war crimes during the war of independence in 1971 in collaboration with the Pakistani Army, has remained an issue of contention among the political parties, received significant international attention and been both applauded and criticized over the past five years. While the international community, particularly, the UN, the EU, the US and the HRW have been critical of the process, no one has questioned the moral basis of these trials. They have supported the idea of bringing justice to those who have committed heinous crimes; additionally, many states and organizations offered to help the process, and unequivocally stated their support for accountability for the horrific crimes committed in 1971. But they have also stressed the need for adhering to international fair trial standards, and upholding the international obligations of the country; they have called for extreme caution against irreversible sentencing. The two tribunals (one established in 2010 and another in 2012) have listed 556 individuals to be tried. To date, these tribunals have delivered 17 verdicts and handed death sentences to 13 accused. Of those who have been tried and sentenced, 10 are leaders of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), 2 are BNP leaders, one is of the Jatiya Party (JP) and another a former local leader of the AL. Of those convicted to life terms by the tribunal one was later sentenced to death by the Supreme Court, while another death sentence has been reduced to 'imprisonment until death'. Three have been tried in absentia; two have died of natural causes after being convicted. They are: Ghulam Azam, the chief ideologue of the JI and Abdul Alim, a BNP leader. Another JI leader died during the trial. Two JI leaders have been executed, Abdul Quader Mollah on 12 December 2013, and Muhammad Quamaruzzaman on 11 April 2015. Eight cases in which the accused are facing death sentence, are now in the appeal process; they are the JI leaders Matiur Rahman Nizami, Ali Ahsan Mujahid, Muhammad Abdus Subhan, Azharul Islam, and Mir Quasem Ali; the BNP

leader Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, the JP leader Syed Muhammad Kayser, and the former AL leader Mobarak Hossain.

Since its establishment the JI has alleged that it is politically motivated, and demanded that the tribunal be scrapped. The BNP, until early 2013, maintained an ambivalent position towards the trial saying that it supports trying war criminals but arguing that the current tribunal lacks transparency and the process is not consistent with international standards. However, since the tribunals began delivering the verdicts in February 2013, the BNP had shown either a muted reaction or maintained a dubious silence. The JI activists have reacted with violence after each verdict. The extent of the violence can be understood from the fact that in five days of violence in Feb-March 2013, in the wake of the verdict handing a death sentence to Delwar Hossain Saidee, 80 people died throughout the country; 40 of them lost their lives on a single day which was described by the BBC as the worst day of political violence in Bangladesh's history. Similar mayhem was unleashed after Quader Mollah's execution resulting in 30 deaths.

Procedural concerns notwithstanding, these trials enjoy support from a broad spectrum of society, for the fundamental reason that it is a moral responsibility of this nation, like any other, to address crimes against humanity, deliver justice and bring an end to the culture of impunity to those who have violently acted against the founding of the state. These trials are also viewed as an unfinished business of 1973, when the first attempt was made, and later abandoned for various reasons. There is no denying that this issue was put on the back burner for too long by politicians of all shades for political expediency and immediate gains, and that all political actors must take some responsibility for being complicit in providing political legitimacy to those who partake in genocidal acts. There is a need to draw attention to the procedural aspects, which the HRW has described as 'serious flaws', for the sake of ensuring closure, and that justice, not revenge, has driven the idea and the process of these trials. It must be recognized that there are those who oppose these trials because they would like to deny that heinous crimes have been committed (for example the JI leader Ali Ahsan Mujahid's statement on 25 October 2007). But those who extend unconditional support to the trials have been far away from accommodating the notion that fair criticisms of the process is not by any means an opposition to the principle of accountability. Since 2013, an environment has been created where some people have questioned the intention and integrity of the critics of the ICT process and at times conflated and/or equated them with the opponents of the trials. Such contrived schisms have not helped the society to have an open conversation on an important issue of such magnitude. This seems to be having a muffling effect. The Tribunal could have acted to help alleviate this situation by encouraging openness, but unfortunately it acted to the contrary in the form of holding individuals, media and human rights organizations in contempt.

In a similar vein, it is necessary to understand that the weaknesses of the tribunals – in regard to competency and procedures – are in large measure reflections of the weaknesses of larger judicial processes of the country. Whether these aspects can be dealt with only by addressing the trials at the ICT is an open question. The International community must be cognizant of this

important aspect. While some countries and organizations can be credited for their principled opposition to the death sentence and expressing concerns regarding intricate details of the processes, some are perceived to be adopting a double-standard, as they have allowed weaker legal processes to continue elsewhere.

The ambiguities of the BNP's stance on the ICT issue and its silence on the verdicts are indicative of its uneasiness with an issue which involves an integral part of the history of the nation; but it can also be interpreted as silent acquiescence despite its alliance with the JI which has most to lose from the process. But given the impact of the trials, the popular support for and importantly, the historical significance of the issue these trials are trying to address, it is necessary that the BNP clarifies its position. It is long overdue that the JI acknowledge that its leadership bears some responsibilities for its role in the genocidal acts in 1971. For a space within the Bangladeshi political landscape, the JI has to confront this question in earnest.

The public's demand that war criminals face trial is sincere, they would like to see justice delivered in the expectation that these trials will lead to closure regarding the painful past of the nation; but this also requires commitment from the ruling Awami League that it won't use the trial as a wedge issue and capitalize on it for partisan interests and immediate political gain. If the AL continue on that path, it will not only betray the people's expectations and change the perception about the intent of these trials, but will also do a disservice to the cause it purports to champion.

#### **The Fading of the Glimmer of Hope?**

The ninety days of violence and political turmoil paused as the date of elections for two City Corporations in Dhaka and the Chittagong were announced. Like elections to other local government bodies, these are non-partisan, but only on paper. Many analysts felt that the decision to hold the long overdue Dhaka City Corporation election on 28 April was meant to catch the BNP off guard; others opined that it has provided the BNP the opportunity to turn away from its already failed 'movement.' The BNP made the welcome decision to participate despite the fact that one of its Mayoral candidates (and many ward level candidates) was unable to campaign due to a number of pending cases and rejection of the bail petition.

As the election campaign began, the public mood changed, many breathed a sigh of relief hoping that it will allow the parties to return to constitutional democratic politics. But it also became evident that the EC was either unable or unwilling to create a 'level-playing field'. In the week before Election Day Khaleda Zia's motorcade was attacked on four occasions on different days. The media identified the attackers as activists and office bearers of the ruling party's student wing, yet the PM, the state minister for home affairs denied their involvement and blamed the security guards for provoking aggrieved citizens; some senior leaders made inflammatory statements. The EC initially decided to deploy the army on the Election Day as demanded by the BNP and other candidates; but reversed its decision within hours. As such, the hope that the Mayoral elections could be the game changer began to fade. Eventually,



Election Day (28 April) turned out to be a farce, according to media reports and observers. Widespread irregularities, rigging, ballot stuffing by the ruling party activists with the connivance of the election officials and in some instances with the help of the members of law enforcement, took place openly. By mid-day, the BNP supported candidates along with a few others declared that they are 'boycotting' the elections.

Yet, the current state of affairs offers a window of opportunity, and a glimmer of hope. Because it appears that the ruling party has realized that it's unrealistic and unacceptable to try to 'annihilate' the opposition either politically and/or physically and that there is little support within society for such extreme measures; and that the opposition has realized that notwithstanding the legitimacy of its demands for a fresh election it had pursued tactics unacceptable to common citizens, failed to gather popular participation and lacks the mobilization capacity to overthrow the government by force.

#### **What's to be done?**

The way forward is best articulated by a prominent scholar on Bangladesh: "Any move to restore predictability to the lives of the people has to move forward through the political process rather than dependence on street violence or the coercive powers of the state. The end result must be a political settlement which recreates a more inclusive political order, underwritten by a fairly acquired democratic mandate [...].How precisely such a political settlement can be realised can only emerge through a negotiating process, premised on an understanding that democratic politics is built on the basis of compromise rather than one side achieving all its goals through deployment of superior force." (Rehman Sobhan, "Is there any light at the end of the tunnel?" *Dhaka Tribune*, 20 February 2015).

To achieve these goals it's imperative that

1. Steps are taken to ensure a 'fairly acquired democratic mandate' for governance.
2. Erosion of fundamental rights be stopped and democratic space for democratic constitutional parties are restored; freedom of assembly, movement and speech guaranteed in the constitution be adhered to in essence and to the letter;
3. Unaccountable and excessive use of the state's coercive power including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearance be brought to an end;
4. All parties, including the opposition parties, unequivocally renounce violence as a means to achieve political goals; and
5. Institutions to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens including exercising the right to vote freely be strengthened;

I must underscore that these are the first steps towards creating an environment for addressing deep-seated structural problems such as methods of peaceful succession of power, role of opposition in governance, and address the issue of war crimes judiciously. These have tormented the nation for the past decade. Suspension of those discussions further will only ensure recurrence of the crises at regular intervals.

### **The Trajectories**

As of today, there are two possible trajectories

1. The current window of opportunity, although far smaller than it was until the city corporations elections, is utilized to its fullest by both parties and a national dialogue is launched without preconditions in earnest to explore the modus operandi of an inclusive national election, code of conduct of political parties, and protection of fundamental rights of citizens to live a life free of fear; the dialogue, whether mediated by domestic actors or international interlocutors, is held involving all political parties and members of the civil society;
2. The current retreat of the opposition and the “success” in the city corporations elections are viewed as a victory by the ruling party, which continues the path of using state power to rout the formidable opposition to create a de facto one party state; conversely the opposition views this as the further erosion of government’s tenuous legitimacy due to its over dependence on force; thus the underlying uncertainty will continue with a possibility of future eruptions of violence.

Which path the political leaders will take is a matter of their choice, but it will certainly affect the lives of all the citizens of Bangladesh and the future of the country. If history is an indicator, this may turn out to be another lost opportunity. But, failing to take advantage of the situation, may push the country into a downward spiral towards a prolonged and unprecedented scale of violence; non-state actors including militant groups with regional and extra-regional connections might take advantage of the instability. This will also provide legitimacy to the extremist forces within the country who currently grudgingly participate in mainstream democratic politics, and frustrate those who like to see a peaceful transition. The high degree of polarization of Bangladeshi society in the past years only makes this scenario far more plausible.

Anyone familiar with the history of North Africa will be able to testify that absence of inclusive democracy and authoritarianism only paves the way for extremism, violence and prolonged conflict.

### **The Role of the International Community**

Although Bangladesh drew the attention of the international community in late 2013 in the wake of the elections, there was lack of serious engagement after the election. The relative calm of 2014 was a wasted opportunity not only for the ruling party but also for the international community in ensuring that democratic norms are upheld. As such, the international community cannot escape responsibility for the political mayhem in early 2015. This is equally true of the United States, which has partnerships with Bangladesh in developmental and security arenas. This is not to suggest that the international community can or should impose a solution, but to underscore that attention only in an election year or during political crises is not helpful.

In equal measure, the international community cannot continue to have a 'Business-as-Usual' approach while the country is slowly descending into a situation which has strong potential for engendering a prolonged conflict.

India, which extended unequivocal support to the incumbent government in holding the election in 2014 and bought into the idea that it was a necessity for constitutional continuity, has both a moral responsibility in ensuring an inclusive democracy and political stability in Bangladesh, and a security interest in ensuring that the country's domestic political dynamics does not engender an environment for long term instability and prolonged violence. In this regard the Indian policymakers need to take a long term approach instead of being driven by a myopic view. An unstable Bangladesh will pose more danger to India than any other alternatives.

### **Conclusion**

Bangladesh was established in 1971 with great potential, and in the past 44 years Bangladeshis have demonstrated that they can achieve greater things. It was founded to ensure 'equality, human dignity and social justice' for all citizens; time and again the citizens have expressed their commitment to these ideals. It is time that the political leaders of Bangladesh firmly establish institutions and practices which would materialize these objectives.

Mr. SALMON. Thank you, Dr. Riaz.  
It looks like we are going to get to another panelist.  
Mr. Kansara.

**STATEMENT OF MR. JAY KANSARA, DIRECTOR, GOVERNMENT  
RELATIONS, HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION**

Mr. KANSARA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and respected members of the subcommittee. It is a privilege for me to appear before you today.

The Hindu American Foundation, a nonprofit advocacy and human rights organization, has been closely monitoring the political and human rights crisis in Bangladesh for several years.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous work of my colleague, HAF senior director and human rights fellow, Samir Kalra, who is the author of our annual human rights report.

Bangladesh has been engulfed by political turmoil and large scale violence since 2013. While the Awami League government has contributed to this unrest through its repressive policies, the primary responsibility for the violence and instability specifically targeting minorities falls upon the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and its largest coalition partner, the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Earlier this year, I visited Dhaka to survey the conditions of religious minorities. On this trip I witnessed first hand the political unrest and its detrimental impact on the daily lives of ordinary Bangladeshis, specifically referring to the hartals.

During this trip where I was joined by HAF volunteer, a native Bengali speaker, Utsav Chakrabarti, we also met with dozens of civil society leaders, human rights activists, minority groups and three members of Parliament, all of whom expressed serious concern with the rising tide of religious intolerance, extremism and a burgeoning threat of pro-ISIS activity in the country.

The escalation of attacks on religious minorities which began in 2013 were still fresh on the minds of Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and secularists whom we met with.

In late January 2013, after the International Crimes Tribunal began announcing convictions of high-level Jamaat and BNP officials, supporters of these organizations engaged in large-scale violence and rioting that plagued Bangladesh for several weeks in a campaign of intimidation directed specifically toward Hindus.

This resulted in more than 100 deaths and hundreds of injuries. Jamaat and Islami Chhatra Shibir activists reportedly also set off bombs in the capital city of Dhaka aimed at causing panic among ordinary citizens.

The Hindu community in particular was systematically attacked, more than 47 temples destroyed, approximately 1,500 homes vandalized or burnt to the ground and in the aftermath of this violence Amnesty International also noted that the Bangladesh Hindu community was at extreme risk.

The Hindu majority—excuse me, the Hindu minority were similarly targeted by Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir in the run-up to the elections during 2014 when an estimated 495 homes were also damaged and 585 shops were looted and 169 temples

were vandalized, this according to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.

Parliamentarian Chhabi Biswas from the Netrokona-1 District described to us in our meeting the warnings he received from radical Islamists to stay silent during election violence targeting members of the Hindu community.

As a result of his refusal to comply, his car was bombed on December 24th of 2014 by BNP activists. Mr. Biswas narrowly escaped death and fortunately is still serving as a member of Parliament. And as recently as April 22, 2015 in the run-up to the execution of Mohammad Kamaruzzaman at least three Hindu temples were attacked in the aftermath of that.

Women are especially vulnerable as well during bouts of anti-minority violence. Thousands of Hindu women have been sexually assaulted or raped by members of Jamaat-e-Islami and its affiliates.

According to first hand information received from the women's wing of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.

Most of the current unrest can be traced back to the coalition that began in 2001 of the BNP and Jamaat alliance where even more significant violence targeting Hindus occurred.

Moreover, activity by militants and radical organization such as Harkat-ul Jihadul Islami, a State Department designated foreign terrorist group, and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh significantly increased during the BNP regime. These organizations are closely linked with Jamaat and have collectively created an atmosphere of violence and intimidation.

As long as Jamaat and other Islamist groups are allowed to operate with impunity, Hindus and other religious minorities as well as atheists remain in critical danger.

Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi Hindus have fled to India over the past 13 years and potentially could obtain citizenship soon, according to statements by the recent Indian government.

Three weeks after I left Bangladesh, Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi writer and blogger, was killed in front of the heavily guarded Dhaka Book Fair and only a mere 5 weeks after that Washikur Rahman was also murdered by machete-wielding assailants.

Many times, these—when any suspects are apprehended they often state that they are acting under the orders of madrassa officials or imams and they have no idea what a blog even is.

The attacks on Roy and Rahman are not isolated incidents but rather reflective of a systematic attempt by radical Islamist groups to undermine the nation's secular fabric.

It is my hope that—and those of Bangladeshis that the U.S. will work to, number one, declare Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir a foreign terrorist group, any officials from Jamaat that have engaged in severe violations as defined by U.S. laws be denied entry into the U.S. and any of these officials who may live in the United States currently should be investigated.

The U.S. Government should strongly condemn all political violence and attacks by Islamist groups and work constructively with the current Bangladeshi government to ensure that these attacks on religious minorities cease in order to bring—and also bring justice to past victims of violence.

Finally, all future military and economic aid to Bangladesh should be conditioned on the improved status for religious and ethnic minorities including increased representation of minorities in various levels of all—of Bangladeshi public life, and this is especially true for the military and civil service apparatus.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kansara follows:]



**“Bangladesh’s Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism”**

**Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee,  
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific  
April 30, 2015**

**Jay Kansara  
Director of Government Relations  
Hindu American Foundation**

**Introduction**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking member Sherman, and respected Members of the Subcommittee, it is a privilege for me to appear before you today to testify on a topic of critical importance to regional stability and U.S. strategic interests in South Asia.

As the Director of Government Relations for the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a non-profit advocacy and human rights organization that has been monitoring and documenting religious freedom and human rights conditions in South Asia for twelve years, I am deeply concerned by the escalating crisis in Bangladesh. I would like to acknowledge the work of HAF Senior Director and Human Rights Fellow, Samir Kalra, Esq., who is the author of our annual human rights report.

An important U.S. ally and trading partner in South Asia, Bangladesh has been engulfed by political turmoil and large-scale violence since 2013. While the Awami League government has contributed to the current unrest by undermining democratic processes and suppressing political dissent, the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its Islamist coalition partner, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), have been primarily responsible for the recent bout of political violence and instability.

Specifically, the BNP-Jamaat alliance has engaged in violent street riots, disrupted public transportation systems utilizing small bombs, forced economic blockades and shutdowns known as “hartals”, and carried out targeted attacks on religious minorities and secular activists. All of these tactics have been carried out in an attempt to create chaos and destabilize the current government. In the first four months of 2015 alone, more than one hundred innocent Bangladeshi citizens have been killed and hundreds more injured, while the violence has cost the economy billions of dollars in lost revenue.

I witnessed first-hand the damage caused by this political unrest and its impact on the daily lives of ordinary Bangladeshis when I visited Dhaka earlier this year on a fact-finding mission for the Hindu American Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The HAF fact-finding mission to Dhaka, Bangladesh spanned a seven day period, from January 29 to February 5, 2015.



During my trip, where I was joined by HAF volunteer and native Bengali speaker, Utsav Chakrabarti, we also met with dozens of civil society leaders, human rights activists, minority groups, and three members of Parliament,<sup>2</sup> all of whom expressed serious concern with the rising tide of religious intolerance, extremism, and the burgeoning threat of pro-ISIS activity in the country.

Three weeks after I left Bangladesh, Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi American writer and blogger, was brutally murdered in front of the heavily guarded Dhaka Book Fair by Islamic extremists for his outspoken criticism of religious fundamentalism. And merely five weeks after Roy's death, a second blogger in Bangladesh, Washikur Rahman, was also killed in broad daylight for espousing similar views on religious extremism.

The attacks on Roy and Rahman were not isolated incidents, but rather reflective of a systematic attempt by radical Islamist groups to undermine the nation's secular fabric.

A prominent secular activist and practicing Muslim whom we met with, for instance, described his trepidation with the increasing Islamization of Bangladeshi society, including in public school textbooks, and its implications for communal harmony and religious freedom. He has publicly stated that he is also under threat by Islamists.

It is my hope, and that of the many Bangladeshis with whom I interacted during my time in the country that:

1. Both the Bangladesh and U.S. governments declare Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir as illegal organization and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) respectively;
2. Any officials from Jamaat-e-Islami that have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom as defined by U.S. laws be denied entry into the United States and any members of Jamaat-e-Islami currently residing in the U.S. who have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom be investigated;
3. The U.S. government strongly condemn all political violence and attacks by Islamist groups and work constructively with the current Bangladeshi government to ensure that attacks on religious minorities and atheists cease in addition to bringing justice to past victims of violence;
4. All future economic and military aid to Bangladesh be conditioned on improved conditions for religious and ethnic minorities, including increased representation of minorities in various levels of Bangladeshi public life.

<sup>2</sup> We were only able to meet with Awami League representatives in Parliament, as our meeting requests to BNP officials were ignored.





## Background

The roots of the current crisis date back to the country's inception in 1971, when Bangladesh achieved independence from Pakistan. That brutal conflict left an estimated three million ethnic Bengalis dead - primarily Hindu, more than ten million displaced, and 200,000 women raped.

The Hindu minority, in particular, bore the brunt of the violence. Hindus were targeted by the Pakistani military and its local Islamist collaborators on a scale and in a manner that constituted "genocide", according to Gary Bass, Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and author of *"The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide."*

Although the Bangladeshi independence movement had emerged from the culmination of several longstanding factors, including linguistic, cultural, economic, and political repression by West Pakistan, at its core it represented an ideological contest between Islamism, perpetuated by Islamabad, and secularism, representing the larger Bengali movement.

That battle continued in the post-independence period due to the assassination of the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, by military officers. Subsequent coups and dictator regimes in Bangladesh have fostered the growth of radical Islam in state affairs. As Islam began to play a greater role in public life and the Constitution was amended multiple times to elevate the status of Islam and Muslims above other religions,<sup>3</sup> Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Ahmadiyyas, and atheists were effectively institutionalized as second-class citizens.

The process of Islamization and religious repression accelerated with the 2001 election of the BNP and its Islamist allies, including Jamaat-e-Islami. During the five-year rule of the BNP-led coalition beginning in 2001, Bangladesh witnessed the increased role of Islam in politics and an explosion of madrasas (Islamic seminaries) teaching the same fundamentalist version of Islam that inspired the Taliban.

Moreover, activity by Muslim militants and radical organizations, such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), a State Department designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO),<sup>4</sup> and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), significantly increased during the BNP regime.

## Growing Religious Extremism and Intolerance

In recent years, Islamist organizations, such as Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), have been rapidly gaining ground in Bangladesh. Despite their relatively smaller numbers, these Islamist organizations exert disproportionate influence over the country's political, social, legal, and religious affairs. They have consistently utilized violent tactics, including bombings, political assassinations, and targeted killings in pursuance of their religio-political goal of creating a theocratic state with limited rights for minorities, atheists, and women.

<sup>3</sup> "Bangladesh Parliament Votes to make Islam State Religion," (June 8, 1988), The New York Times, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940DE5D71530F83BA35756C0A96F94826>

<sup>4</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/t/cif/s/other/des/123025.htm>



Jamaat-e-Islami is the most powerful Islamist group in the country and has been the ideological center and recruiting base for several terrorist groups in Bangladesh, including Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh. Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh has carried out several high-profile bombings and was responsible for a bomb blast in India's West Bengal state as recently as October 2014. The blast was reportedly part of a larger plan to target Hindu religious festivals in the state in conjunction with the Indian Mujahideen, a State Department designated FTO.<sup>5</sup>

Jamaat-e-Islami also enjoys extensive links to the wider militant network operating in South Asia and has also been intimately involved in facilitating terrorist activities outside of Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup>

Emblematic of Jamaat-e-Islami's commitment to a narrow sectarian agenda, in his final interview prior to his execution for committing war crimes during the 1971 war, Mohammad Kamaruzzaman, assistant secretary of the organization, expressed his desire that Islamist forces would "dominate politics and govern Bangladesh."<sup>7</sup>

Another Islamist organization, Hefazat-e-Islam, gained notoriety in 2013 after calling for the prosecution and execution of "atheist bloggers," as part of its 13-point Islamist agenda. The charter included, in part, "banning women from the work force by ending 'free mixing' of the sexes, a harsh new blasphemy law similar to Pakistan's, the declaration of the beleaguered Ahmadi sect as non-Muslim, and an end to 'candle lighting in the name of personal freedom and free speech.'"<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Hefazat's agenda demanded the removal of sculptures, "special protection" for Islam, and reinstatement of references to Allah in the constitution.<sup>9</sup>

Hefazat derives its strength from its control over many of the country's madrassas (Islamic schools), where one of Washikur Rahman's killers was a student. According to the Center For Inquiry, a leading secular human rights organization, at least eight bloggers have been attacked by Islamist groups such as Hefazat, Islami Chattra Shibir, and Ansar-Bangla 7, since 2004. And countless other bloggers critical of growing extremism have gone into hiding after receiving death threats from Islamist groups.

Beyond the dangers posed by indigenous Islamist groups, the expanding threat of ISIS activities in Bangladesh should raise concerns for the international community. In October 2014, for example, a British man was arrested by Bangladeshi authorities near the capital of Dhaka while recruiting for

<sup>5</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/t/cir/s/other/des/123085.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Terrorist and Extremist Groups – Bangladesh, South Asia Terrorism Portal, <http://www.satp.org/satporg/countries/bangladesh/terroristoutfits/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> "Bangladesh's Kamaruzzaman Hopes Before Execution", (April 13, 2015) On Islam

"<http://www.onislam.net/english/news/asia-pacific/484995-bangladeshs-kamaruzzaman-hopes-before-execution.html>

<sup>8</sup> Dhume, Sadanand, "Bangladesh on the Brink," (May 9, 2013), The Wall Street Journal, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB100014241278873237446045784725232260433>

<sup>9</sup> Grahame, Lucas, "Bangladeshi Islamists are Gaining Ground," (September 5, 2013), DW, <http://www.dw.de/bangladeshi-islamists-are-gaining-ground/a-16798866>



ISIS under the guise of Tablighi Jamaat, a missionary Islamic group with terrorist links. And in January 2015, four other individuals were arrested for their links to ISIS.

Since Islamist organizations, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, share a similar ideology with ISIS and a common agenda of creating an Islamic state, formal collaboration would be catastrophic for this nation of 166 million.

### **Escalating Anti-Minority Violence**

Amidst the recent political unrest, there has been a concurrent escalation in anti-minority violence that began in 2013.

In late January 2013, after the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), commissioned to investigate war crimes from the 1971 War of Independence, started announcing convictions of high-level Jamaat and BNP officials, supporters of these organizations engaged in large-scale violence and rioting. The violence plagued Bangladesh for several weeks, resulting in more than 100 deaths and hundreds of injuries. Jamaat and Islami Chhatra Shibir activists reportedly also set off small bombs in the capital city of Dhaka, aimed at causing panic amongst ordinary Bangladeshi citizens.

The Hindu community, in particular, was systematically attacked with more than 47 temples destroyed and approximately 700 - 1500 homes vandalized or burned to the ground (estimates vary) at the beginning of 2013. In the aftermath of the violence, Amnesty International noted with concern that the Hindu community in Bangladesh was at extreme risk.

The Hindu minority was similarly targeted by Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir, in the run-up to and during elections in early 2014, when an estimated 495 Hindu homes were damaged, 585 shops were attacked or looted, and 169 temples were vandalised according to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.

Women have been especially vulnerable during recent bouts of anti-minority violence, and many Hindu women have been sexually assaulted and raped by members of Jamaat-e-Islami and its affiliates, according to first-hand information received from the Women's Wing of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian United Council.

Parliamentarian Chhabi Biswas, from the Netrokona-1 district, described to us the warnings he received from radical Islamists to stay silent during election violence targeting members of the Hindu community. As a result of his refusal to comply, his car was bombed on December 24 by BNP activists.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Biswas narrowly escaped death and is still serving as a Member of Parliament.

And as recently as April 11, 2015, at least three Hindu temples were attacked in the aftermath of Mohammad Kamaruzzaman's execution.

<sup>10</sup> "AL MP Chhabi Biswas as BNP-AL supporters clash", (BDNews24.com)

<http://bdnews24.com/politics/2014/12/24/al-mp-chhabi-biswas-assaulted-as-bnp-al-supporters-clash>



Hindus and other religious minorities, as well as atheists, remain in critical danger, as long as Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamist groups are allowed to operate with impunity.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Given Bangladesh's strategic location and importance as a trade partner, its internal security and stability are essential to U.S. national interests in South Asia. These core objectives, however, are undermined by the ongoing political violence, repeated attacks on religious minorities and atheists, expanding religious intolerance and suppression of free speech, and growing destabilization caused by radical groups, including Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir.

Conditions in Bangladesh also have wider regional implications, including the large-scale migration of Bangladeshis to India, along with the increased infiltration of narcotics, arms, and militants across the border.

Consequently, the U.S. should more actively engage with the Government of Bangladesh over our shared interests in safeguarding human rights, religious freedom, and secular democracy in Bangladesh, while preventing the growth of religious extremism and militancy.

Furthermore, on behalf of the Hindu American Foundation, I respectfully submit the following recommendations to this Subcommittee:

1. The U.S. should strongly encourage the Government of Bangladesh to declare Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir illegal organizations, based on their long-standing involvement in terrorist activities and violence against religious minorities, and impose complete bans on their activities.
2. Similarly, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir should be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under section 1(b) of Executive Order 13224,<sup>11</sup> as their activities threaten American national security and economic interests in Bangladesh and the wider region.
3. Under section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the U.S. should deny entry to any officials from Jamaat-e-Islami that have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom as defined by section 3 of the International Religious Freedom Act,<sup>12</sup> and investigate any members of Jamaat-e-Islami currently residing in the U.S. who have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.
4. U.S. government officials, including State Department and Embassy representatives, should speak out strongly and unequivocally against all political violence and attacks by Islamist

<sup>11</sup> Terrorism Designations FAQs, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/opa/ps/2014/01/219520.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Ineligibilities and Waivers: Laws, Bureau of Consular Affairs -- U.S. Department of State, <http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/general/ineligibilities.html>.



groups, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, on religious minorities and atheists. U.S. officials should further work constructively with the current Government of Bangladesh to ensure that attacks on religious minorities and atheists cease, rehabilitate past victims of violence, and bring to swift justice those political and radical religious elements that have led the assault on minorities.

5. The U.S. should condition all future economic and military aid to Bangladesh only after robust monitoring by the State Department and Congress indicates improved conditions for religious and ethnic minorities. The U.S. should encourage Bangladesh to induct more religious minority community members in government administrative and military services, particularly at the officer level, as a specific condition for aid.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much.

We would ask people to restrain the clapping. We generally don't do that in the committee hearings. Thank you.

Mr. Fleischli, we should have time for another presentation. Dr. Ayres, we will probably wait until we come back after the votes to go to you.

But Mr. Fleischli, you are recognized for 5 minutes. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF MR. STEVEN D. FLEISCHLI, PRESIDENT, U.S.-  
BANGLADESH TRADE AND RELATIONS ASSOCIATION**

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sherman and members of the subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity. It is truly an honor to appear in front of you today.

I will be summarizing my written statement which I requested be submitted for the record.

Mr. CHABOT. Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. My name is Steve Fleischli and I live in St. Louis, Missouri. I have travelled to Bangladesh for many years, for the first time starting in 2007. I have walked the floors of factories. I know many workers and I have got Bangladeshi business associates.

In Bangladesh I have been integral in the development of new factories, more than 5,000 jobs in the textile industry and with exports of more than \$40 million per year to the United States and other countries.

Because I care deeply for the future of the U.S. and Bangladesh relationship and believe in the potential for continued growth in Bangladesh, I co-founded the U.S.-Bangladesh Trade and Relations Association.

UBTRA, as we call it, is a new business organization that advocates for human rights, workers' rights, political accountability as a basic frame work for building and enabling an economic environment for business in Bangladesh with the United States. Bangladesh has made some progress in economic development for sure.

Trade and international investment have played an integral role in bringing industry to the country and spurring unprecedented economic growth.

However, there is still a major need for improvement in Bangladesh in the sphere of political accountability and labor and human rights. Recent violence in Bangladesh resulting the loss of life and property including many—including American citizens speaks to this urgent need for reform and reconciliation.

Just 2 days ago, the elections in three city corporations—Dhaka North, Dhaka South and Chittagong—were marked by violence, intimidation and vote rigging, as you noted earlier, as well as a boycott from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

Allegations of irregularities were received from many different polling station including in Chittagong, the second largest city and the main seaport of Bangladesh and the port of which I have two factories that I ran.

As a CEO of a textile company, I manage two factories within that Chittagong export processing zone. My company exported to multiple major U.S. discount, department and mass merchant stores from 2008 until 2012.

Today, I have the opportunity to again invest in factories in this same zone but because of the instability, after upwards of 2 years of planning I will not make that investment quite yet.

Similarly, the violence and perceived impediments to trade and investment in Bangladesh have hampered UBTRA's ability to grow its membership among U.S. and Bangladeshi businesses, in particular with small and medium-sized enterprises.

Other global corporations with interests in both countries as well as among stakeholders such as the youth and the diaspora.

The basic tenets of UBTRA we applaud the recent approval by the House of Foreign Affairs Committee, H.R. 1891, a bill to extend the African Growth and Opportunity Act, the generalized system of preferences, the preferential duty treatment for Haiti and for other purposes.

WE support extension of the GSP program through 2017. However, we strongly oppose that Bangladesh receive benefit of that GSP until such a time that Bangladesh has fully implemented all the required reforms and actions that have been set forth in the Bangladesh Action Plan of 2013 provided by the Obama administration.

UBTRA asserts that while improved trade relations are a desirable goal, at no point in time should they supersede human rights and worker safety initiatives.

UBTRA supports the right of Bangladeshi workers to work in a safe and a healthy environment. We believe that a responsible trade policy is one of the key aspects to preserving the rights of Bangladeshi workers and citizens and seek to promote a responsible trade relationship between the United States and Bangladesh.

ULTRA is concerned about the election process in Bangladesh which, as noted above, is plagued by political violence and boycotts by prominent political parties. We believe the formulation of a democratic and free society forms the backbone for an efficient and responsible economy.

Regarding labor and human rights, in Bangladesh there is a lack of respect for fundamental human rights that is a major barrier to growth in the U.S.-Bangladesh business relationship.

Over the past decade, various highly respected human rights organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Asian Human Rights Commission and ODHIKAR, a preeminent human rights NGO in Bangladesh, have documented extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, torture, election interference and corruption.

Overall, ODHIKAR had documented 2,216 extrajudicial killings that occurred between 2001 and 2013 in Bangladesh. Closely tied to the broader human rights culture in the country, our concern is for worker safety and rights. The 2013 Rana Plaza and 2012 Tazreen fire disasters tragically highlighted the disastrous working conditions that are pervasive in the Bangladeshi manufacturing sector.

A new report from Human Rights Watch details the continuous violations of workers' rights, allegations of illegal anti-union tactics and the inadequacy of reforms and company interventions to date.

Just last week, Secretary Kerry and the U.S. trade representative Michael Froman along with other high-level U.S. Government

officials and EU officials issued a statement detailing the work that remains to improve labor standards and working conditions.

In particular, both parties support efforts to continue reforming labor laws in consultation with the ILO, complete all factory safety inspections and register unions efficiently and with transparency.

Unless significant changes are made in the handling of labor organizers and civil society activists, the trade relationship will suffer.

Mr. CHABOT. Mr. Fleischli, are you close to wrapping up? Because you are about a minute over now.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Okay. I get—

Mr. CHABOT. You want to make a concluding statement or something?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Yes, I will make a real quick conclusion.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. At the end of the day what UBTRA would like to see happen is there has been a lot of talk lately from the U.S. toward Bangladesh but there needs to be actual physical action.

Our recommendations or ideas would be reducing FMF and IMET funding—potentially, we currently fund police training of the Bangladeshi police here in the U.S. as well as military training here in the U.S.—continued suspension of the GSP benefits, and any other military and trade sanctions that might be possible to help change the direction of the current situation of Bangladesh.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fleischli follows:]





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**Statement of Steven D. Fleischli  
Co-founder and President  
US-Bangladesh Trade and Relations Association (UBTRA)**

**Before the**

**House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

**April 30, 2015**

**Hearing on “Bangladesh’s Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism”**

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sherman, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Steve Fleischli. I traveled to Bangladesh for the first time in 2007. I have walked the floors of factories, know many workers, and have Bangladeshi business associates. In Bangladesh, I have been integral in the development of new factories and more than 5,000 jobs in the textile industry, and with exporting more than \$40,000,000 per year to the United States and other countries.

Because I care deeply for the future of the US-Bangladesh relationship and believe in the potential for continued growth in Bangladesh, I co-founded and am President of the US-Bangladesh Trade and Relations Association (UBTRA). UBTRA is a new business organization that advocates for human rights, workers’ rights, and political accountability as a basic framework for building an enabling economic environment for business in Bangladesh and with the United States.

Bangladesh has made some progress in economic development. Trade and international investment have played an integral role in bringing industry to the country, and spurring unprecedented economic growth. However, there is still a major need for improvement in Bangladesh in the sphere of political

accountability, and labor and human rights. Recent violence in Bangladesh resulting in loss of life and property, including of American citizens, speaks to this urgent need for reform and reconciliation.

Just two days ago, the elections in three city corporations were marked by violence and vote-rigging, as well as a boycott.<sup>1</sup> Allegations of irregularities were received from many different polling stations, including in Chittagong, the second-largest city and main seaport of Bangladesh.

As the CEO of a textile company, I managed two factories within the Chittagong Export Processing Zone (EPZ). My company exported to multiple major US discount department and warehouse stores from 2008 to 2012. Today, I have the opportunity to again invest in factories in the Chittagong EPZ, but because of the instability, after upwards of two years of planning, I will not make that investment at this time.

Similarly, the violence and perceived impediments to trade and investment in Bangladesh have hampered UBTRA's ability to grow its membership among US and Bangladeshi businesses, in particular with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), other global corporations with interest in both countries, as well as among stakeholders such as the youth and Diaspora.

#### **Basic Tenets of UBTRA**

UBTRA applauds the recent approval by the House Foreign Affairs Committee of HR 1891, "A bill to extend the African Growth and Opportunity Act, the Generalized System of Preferences, the preferential duty treatment program for Haiti, and for other purposes." We support extension of the GSP program through 2017. However, we oppose the renewal of GSP benefits for Bangladesh until the Government of Bangladesh has fully implemented all the required reforms and actions set forth in the *Bangladesh Action Plan 2013* provided by the Obama Administration.

As you know, Bangladesh's GSP privileges were suspended in the summer of 2013 following a multi-year investigation and repeated human rights infractions and

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<sup>1</sup> Prothom Alo, "Rigging, violence, boycott plague city polls," April 28, 2015, <http://en.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/news/65011/Voting-plagued-by-rigging-violence-boycott-ends>.

worker safety violations. The most recent USTR-led interagency review concluded, as of January 2015, that more needs to be done in Bangladesh on worker safety and rights before reinstatement of Bangladesh's trade benefits under GSP can be considered. UBTRA asserts that while improved trade relations are a desirable goal, at no point should they supersede human rights and workers safety initiatives.

UBTRA supports the right of Bangladeshi workers to work in a safe and healthy environment. We believe that responsible trade policy is one of the key aspects to preserving the rights of Bangladeshi workers and citizens, and seek to promote a responsible trade relationship between the United States and Bangladesh.

UBTRA is concerned about the elections process in Bangladesh, which, as noted above, is plagued by political violence and boycotts by prominent political parties. The January 2014 and the recent elections demonstrate a troubling pattern in electoral politics in Bangladesh. Further, they are representative of decades of political turmoil that has plagued the nation, much of which has prevented Bangladesh from reaching its full potential both economically and socially. We believe the formulation of a democratic and free society forms the backbone for an efficient and responsible economy.

#### **Labor and Human Rights**

In Bangladesh, there is lack of respect for fundamental human rights that is a major barrier to the growth in the US-Bangladesh business relationship. Over the past decade, various highly respected human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Asian Human Rights Commission, and Odhikar, preeminent human rights NGO in Bangladesh, have documented extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, torture, election interference, and corruption. Overall, Odhikar has documented 2,216 extrajudicial killings that occurred between 2001 and 2013 in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup>

Closely tied to the broader human rights culture in the country, are concerns for worker safety and rights. The 2013 Rana Plaza and 2012 Tazreen Fire disasters tragically highlighted the disastrous working conditions pervasive in the Bangladeshi manufacturing sector. International groups such as the *Alliance for*

<sup>2</sup> Odhikar, "Stats on extrajudicial killings from 2001-2013," <http://odhikar.org/extrajudicial-killings/>.

*Bangladeshi Workers Safety* and the *Bangladesh Accord for Fire and Building Safety*, organizations aimed at rectifying many of the manufacturing problems, have cited the immediate need for improvements in building safety and regulatory policy, and have gone as far as to recommend the closure of several factories due to structural damage and fire risk.

In August 2013, prominent labor rights defender Adilur Rahman Khan, winner of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights award and Secretary of Odhikar, was jailed for publishing false images and information and disrupting the law and order situation of Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the 2013 revision of the nation's labor laws, despite allowing for the registration of labor unions, failed to remove certain restrictions of freedom of association and protest.

In 2014 and 2015, labor and human rights abuses have been perpetuated. A new report from Human Rights Watch details the continuing violations of workers' rights, allegations of illegal anti-union tactics, and the inadequacy of reforms and company interventions to-date.<sup>4</sup>

Just last week, Secretary John Kerry and US Trade Representative Michael Froman, along with other high-level US Government officials and European Union (EU) officials, issued a statement detailing the work that remains to improve labor standards and working conditions. In particular, the US and EU support efforts to continue reforming labor laws in consultation with the ILO, complete all factory safety inspections, and register unions efficiently and with transparency.<sup>5</sup>

Unless significant changes are made in the handling of labor organizers and civil society activists, the trade relationship will suffer.

UBTRA advocates for stronger enforcement of internationally recognized human and labor rights, and believes that continued economic pressure from the United States should be directed to ensure this outcome.

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<sup>3</sup> Odhikar, "Statement on arrest of Adilur Rahman Khan, Secretary of Odhikar," <http://odhikar.org/statement-on-arrest-of-adilur-rahman-khan-odhikar-secretary/>.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most," April 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2015/04/22/whoever-raises-their-head-suffers-most>.

<sup>5</sup> US Department of State, "Joint Statement on the Second Anniversary of the Rana Plaza Disaster in Bangladesh," April 24, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/241083.htm>.

### Political Accountability

Political transparency is a requisite to economic well-being and overall societal stability. It is only when a government receives a true public mandate that policy can be made in a democratic fashion. The January 2014 and recent elections have done little to allay investors' fears about the political situation in Bangladesh and are damaging to the US-Bangladesh trade and business relationship.

Violence wracked the country before, during, and after the elections. Human Rights Watch attributed the chaos to both sides, stating: "On numerous occasions, opposition party members and activists threw petrol bombs at trucks, buses, and motorized rickshaws that defied the traffic blockades or were simply parked by the side of the road. In some cases, opposition group members forced children to carry out the attacks."<sup>6</sup>

As a result, the "government responded by deploying the notorious paramilitary unit, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), as well as the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) and the police, often under the rubric of 'joint forces.' Members of these units individually or in joint operations carried out extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and the unlawful destruction of private property."<sup>7</sup> Many of these same RAB members are now members of the UN Peacekeeping Forces.

A few years ago, when on a business trip to Bangladesh with a major US discount store, we witnessed the beating of a seemingly innocent citizen by a RAB officer while in route to a factory. My client was disturbed by this violence. Within months of this incident, top management of this discount chain instructed its buyers that they were no longer allowed to visit factories in Bangladesh. Alternate locations for production were pursued and ultimately they located to China.

Considering the enormously negative effects of political violence and resulting instability of the business environment, UBTRA supports calls for new elections in Bangladesh.

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<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Democracy in Crossfire," April 29, 2014, [www.hrw.org/reports/2014/04/29/democracy-crossfire](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/04/29/democracy-crossfire).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

**Conclusion**

UBTRA believes profitable and sustainable trade and investment results from a secure social, political and economic environment. While we understand that political and religious extremism contribute to the instability and violence in Bangladesh, UBTRA contends that fundamental pillars must be built to support basic human rights, international labor standards, transparency, viable political institutions, and religious freedom.

UBTRA believes that renewal of GSP for Bangladesh and other points of leverage should be exercised until Bangladesh fulfills all required reforms and actions; supports workers' rights and safety; opposes political and civil violence, including by the RAB; and supports a free and fair elections process.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, UBTRA is dedicated to promoting a good trade and investment relationship between Bangladesh and the United States. One that is based on strong institutions, the tenets of democracy, and the international standard of human and labor rights. We are committed to working with you and other Members of Congress, and with the business and advocacy communities, to furthering this goal.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.

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Mr. CHABOT. And as I mentioned before, we have a series of votes. We have three votes, which generally we are looking at about ½ hour before we would be back here.

If you want to go out in the hallway, we won't be in session here again for about ½ hour and as soon as we get back, we will get started and we will go to you then, Dr. Ayres, and then we will ask questions.

If there is no further business before votes, we will be in recess here for about ½ hour.

[Recess.]

Mr. CHABOT. The committee will come back to order. I want to thank everyone for being patient with us, and Dr. Ayres, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF ALYSSA AYRES, PH.D., SENIOR FELLOW FOR INDIA, PAKISTAN, AND SOUTH ASIA, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS**

Ms. AYRES. Thank you very much.

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sherman, Congressman Chabot and members of the subcommittee, thank you very much for the invitation to appear before you on political and religious extremism and Bangladesh. I am honored to be part of this distinguished panel.

My comments summarize my more detailed written testimony submitted for the record. Bangladesh has been in the news for terrible reasons. On March 30th, Washikur Rahman was hacked to death in Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka.

The month before, Avijit Roy was hacked to death as he left the Dhaka Book Fair. In 2013, Ahmed Rajib Haider was hacked to death with machetes, also in Dhaka. All three were bloggers targeted by radical Islamists for their atheist views.

These murders occurred in the context of political unrest so I will offer a few words about the political and economic situation before returning to discuss Islamic extremism.

Bangladesh's politics are hurting its economy. Bangladesh is a country of 160 million people of whom approximately 90 percent are Muslim.

Bangladeshi politics are polarized at the best of times but particularly in the last 2 years. In last year's national election one major party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, refused to participate, which resulted in a landslide reelection of the Awami League. The BNP abstained because elections were overseen by the Bangladesh Election Commission rather than a neutral caretaker government.

All efforts to mediate by Bangladeshis, foreign diplomats and United Nations failed. On January 5th this year, 1 year after the election, the BNP began renewed public strikes against the government, adding transportation blockades to its tactics.

The BNP hopes that street pressure will achieve fresh elections. But public strikes in Bangladesh often result in violence. Since January 5th, more than 120 people have been killed.

Contributing to the polarized situation, the BNP chairperson, Begum Khaleda Zia, faces graft charges and was effectively held under house arrest for weeks earlier this year. The government has

cracked down on the opposition and on the media, and the ongoing international crimes tribunal, seeking accountability and justice for the horrible crimes committed during Bangladesh's liberation struggle in 1971 adds further fuel to this combustible mix.

All of this is now hurting the economy. The IMF lowered its economic growth forecast for Bangladesh to 6 percent, noting that the resurgence of unrest in recent months is taking a toll on the economy. A World Bank official told the Los Angeles Times that the larger economic toll of political unrest could be as high as \$2 billion.

The garment industry, a major employer, is facing a 30 to 40 percent downturn in orders by one estimate. This is all linked to the instability rising from extreme political polarization—Islamist violence in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has come a long way since 500 bombs exploded simultaneously in nearly every district in the country in August 2005. Successive governments have focused on tackling terrorism and have been largely successful. Still, three disturbing developments bear watching.

First, the Hefazat-e-Islam emerged as a force in 2013 with austere demands that included a blasphemy law with the death penalty, punishment for “atheist bloggers” who insult Islam, prevention of men and women from what they called free mixing and ending of what they called an anti-Islam women policy.

The second concern relates to the dispossessed Rohingya people. There have been reports in Bangladesh and in India that the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the Mumbai attacks of 2008, have been trying to recruit Rohingya refugees.

Third, the dramatic spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State into South Asia and the announcement last fall of a new Indian subcontinent subsidiary of al-Qaeda have captured attention.

In January, Bangladeshi authorities arrested four men suspected of Islamic State membership. Last September, a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in Dhaka under charges of recruiting for the Islamic State.

Recommendations for U.S. policy: I will provide four, and more detail about my recommendations is in my written testimony. First, support the requested increase in resources focused on democracy and governance programs in U.S. assistance to Bangladesh and consider supplementing further.

U.S. assistance to Bangladesh has been concentrated in health, food security and climate change. The resources available to provide democracy and governance support are small compared with the outlays for these three categories. They are also very small compared to our support for these categories in Pakistan.

Two, continue and expand the growing U.S.-Bangladesh counter-terrorism and security cooperation. This has been a very successful area. Bangladesh seeks our assistance, is trying to do more and can benefit from our continued support.

Relatively small amounts of assistance can go a long way, particularly on topics like community policing, anti-money laundering, counter terrorist financing and strengthening capacity within the justice system.



Three, deepen security consultation with India about Bangladesh. Regularly consultations covering security matters in South Asia should be continued and enhanced, especially given the developments discussed above, which India watches closely.

And finally, four: Continue looking for ways to incentivize political reconciliation in Bangladesh. Finding a way to bridge the chasm between Bangladesh's two major political parties and a deep personal enmity that drives their differences had proven Sisyphean.

The United States should look for positive incentives to emphasize more robustly such as the prospect of a Millennium Challenge Corporation threshold program should Bangladesh reach a better situation of governance and law and order.

We should also continue to impress upon the Bangladesh government as well as the opposition the enormous opportunity costs to the country from its ongoing political stalemate. It is a country with a spirit of entrepreneurship and huge unrealized promise. A better political environment would position Bangladesh for great things.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ayres follows:]

## Political Polarization and Religious Extremism in Bangladesh

Prepared statement by

**Alyssa Ayres**

*Senior Fellow for India, Pakistan, and South Asia  
Council on Foreign Relations*

Before the

**Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

*United States House of Representatives  
1st Session, 114th Congress*

### Hearing on “Bangladesh’s Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism”

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sherman, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you very much for the invitation to appear before you on the critically important issue of political and religious extremism in Bangladesh. I am honored to be part of this distinguished panel, and am grateful that you have chosen to focus on this significant country, one that remains relatively under-studied.

Bangladesh has been in the news for terrible reasons recently. On March 30 a young blogger, Washiqur Rahman, was hacked to death in Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka. That attack came on the heels of a similar murder the month before: another blogger, an American citizen named Avijit Roy, was stabbed and hacked to death February 26 as he left the Dhaka book fair. Two years earlier, in 2013, a blogger named Ahmed Rajib Haider was attacked in Dhaka and hacked to death with machetes. All three were targeted by radical Islamists for holding atheist views and writing about them openly.

As I have argued elsewhere, these assassinations have opened a new front between the values of a syncretic, secular, humanistic Bangladeshi culture against a rigid worldview incapable of allowing difference to coexist. These murders have been all the more troubling given Bangladesh's comparative moderation and its well-known economic and development successes. The rise of this extreme form of violent Islam is occurring at a moment when Bangladeshi politics have become extremely polarized, and in a sense creating

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a governance vacuum. I will offer a few words about the present political and economic situation before returning to the matter of Islamic extremism in the country.

### **Bangladesh's Politics Are Hurting Its Economy**

Bangladesh is a country of nearly 160 million people of whom approximately 90 percent are Muslim. While no one would argue that Bangladeshi politics are congenial at the best of times, the last two years have been particularly bitter. The election of January 5, 2014 in which one major political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), refused to participate resulted in a landslide reelection of the Awami League. More than half the seats went uncontested. The Awami League government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now has a term that will run through late 2018.

The BNP refused to participate in the national election last year because elections were overseen by the Bangladesh Election Commission rather than a neutral caretaker government, as had been past practice. Efforts by Bangladeshis, foreign diplomats, and the United Nations to mediate and achieve a compromise between the BNP and Awami League in the run up to the 2014 elections failed. The BNP now calls January 5 “Murder of Democracy Day.” After a period of relative quiet during much of 2014, the BNP began renewed public strikes against the current government on January 5 of this year, paralyzing major cities for months. The BNP has added transportation blockades to its set of tactics. It hopes to use street pressure to achieve fresh elections.

Unfortunately public strikes in Bangladesh are not peaceful. These strikes, known as *hartals*, often result in violence. Images from strikes of the past year and a half include buses and trains set on fire and street fights. Since the January 5, 2015 renewal of strikes, more than 120 people have been killed, according to the latest press reports. These strikes are called by the BNP and the transport blockade has been endorsed at the highest levels of the party by chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. The BNP is supported by the Jamaat-e-Islami, which used to be a recognized political party in Bangladesh but has been banned from active politics due to its religious, not secular, platform. The Jamaat-e-Islami has a student wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir, which routinely appears in the headlines as the perpetrators of street violence.

It has not helped defuse the situation that Begum Zia faces graft charges for which she is now on bail, and was effectively under house arrest in her party office for weeks earlier this year. She has come under physical attack in public, most recently on April 22 in her motorcade while she was campaigning for city elections. The BNP says Awami League-backed thugs are responsible for the attack.

It has also not helped matters that the Awami League government has substantially cracked down on the opposition and on the media. Human Rights Watch issued a call earlier this year for the Bangladeshi government to end what they called arbitrary arrests, excessive use of force, and censorship. One leading BNP official, spokesman Salahuddin Ahmed, remains missing since March.

And the ongoing International Crimes Tribunal—seeking accountability and justice for the horrible crimes committed during Bangladesh's liberation struggle in 1971—adds further fuel to this combustible mix. That those responsible for committing crimes against humanity during those tragic months should be brought to justice is not in dispute. However, procedural flaws of these trials have raised questions about due process

for the defendants; for example, defendants sentenced to death have not been permitted appeal. Those under trial and convicted are primarily members of the Jamaat-e-Islami as well as a member of the BNP, further inflaming the overall atmosphere of polarization in Bangladesh.

None of this backdrop excuses the use of violence on the streets, but it does provide the context for today's fractures. Further, all of this is now taking a toll on the economy in ways that were not the case two years ago. Notably, Bangladesh's politics have been toxic for decades, and the country has managed to muddle through. It has more or less attained economic growth rates of between 5 and 6 percent for most of the last two decades. However, Bangladesh has been looking to accelerate its growth, particularly through its large export-oriented garment industry. The garment industry employs more than four million Bangladeshis, more than 80 percent women, and has been a bridge out of poverty for many. Its shortcomings in workplace safety and labor rights are of course well-known and I will not detail those here.

In mid-March, following the completion of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission to review the state of the Bangladeshi economy, mission lead Rodrigo Cubero issued a statement pointedly noting "the resurgence of unrest in recent months is taking a toll on the economy." The IMF lowered its forecast for Bangladesh's economic growth by half a percentage point, down to 6 percent.<sup>1</sup> This is now well below the Bangladeshi government's target of over 7 percent. Indeed, in February the finance minister of Bangladesh told a press conference that he doubted the country would be able to meet its 7.3 percent growth target due to political unrest.<sup>2</sup> A World Bank official told the *Los Angeles Times* that the larger economic toll of political unrest could be as high as \$2 billion.<sup>3</sup>

Bangladesh's garment industry has begun to speak about a decline in orders. The head of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Export Association (BGMEA) told the press that between foreign currency depreciation and political violence in Bangladesh, buyers are offering lower prices and "do not want to come to Bangladesh to place orders amid the violence." The newspaper *Prothom Alo* quoted an industry source assessing the downturn in orders at 30 to 40 percent.<sup>4</sup> All of this is directly related to the instability and unrest arising from Bangladesh's extreme political polarization.

### Islamist Violence in Bangladesh

I began by noting the assassinations of three atheist bloggers by Islamists in Bangladesh. But we should recognize that Bangladesh has come a long way since five hundred bombs exploded simultaneously in nearly every district in the country in August 2005. That attack, for which the terrorist group Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility, was a wake-up call for the region. While Bangladesh had been the home of the Pakistan-linked terrorist group known as the Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), implicated in plots to assassinate Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina, the August 2005

<sup>1</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Statement at the Conclusion of the IMF Mission for the Fifth and Sixth Reviews under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) Arrangement with Bangladesh," Press Release No. 15/103, March 10, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Muhich Tears Non-Attainment of GDP Growth Target for FY15," *The Financial Express*, February 8, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> See "Businesses See Political Unrest Hitting Bangladesh's Image," *bhnews24.com*, March 3, 2015; see also Shashank Bengali and Mohiuddin Kader, "Bangladesh's long political crisis: Deaths and a Stilted Economy," *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "RMG Exports to Big Markets Nosedive," *Prothom Alo*, February 16, 2015.

synchronized explosions put Bangladesh, known for its moderate Islamic practices and never previously considered a hotbed of radicalism, on the international terrorism agenda. Bangladesh, then led by a BNP government, banned the JMB and HUJI-B in 2005.

Since then, successive Bangladeshi governments have focused intensively on tackling the internal terrorism threat, and have been largely successful in doing so. The Awami League government has also prioritized eliminating safehavens for insurgents focused on the northeastern Indian states, such as the group known as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Counterterrorism cooperation between the governments of India and Bangladesh has gone very well, as noted publicly in the joint communiqué issued during Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India.<sup>5</sup> Bangladesh and the United States signed a Counterterrorism Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding in 2013, and continue to work together on this crucial area, including through technical exchange, training on law enforcement, and building stronger prosecution capacity.<sup>6</sup> Against the backdrop of Bangladesh's successes countering terrorism, three disturbing developments bear watching.

First, the emergence of a new Islamist group in 2013 raised the stakes with their public demands against "atheist bloggers" and other perceived sins. Hefazat-e-Islam, formed in Chittagong in southeast Bangladesh in 2010, was not on the international radar screen until it staged a "long march" from Chittagong all the way to capital Dhaka in 2013 as a counterprotest to a largely secular youth protest group seeking the death penalty for those convicted of war crimes. The group released a set of thirteen austere demands that included: a blasphemy law with a death penalty provision; punishment for "atheist" bloggers and others who "insult Islam"; prevention of men and women from "free mixing"; ending of "anti-Islam women policy" and education policy; a demand to "stop turning Dhaka into a city of idols" and stop erecting sculptures; and several others.

All these demands struck counter to Bangladesh's longtime culture of moderation, emphasis on women and girls' development, culture of free expression, and appreciation of the arts. Hefazat-e-Islam is not a declared terrorist group, but in 2013 they indicated ability to employ violence toward their goals. The "Long March" of April 6, 2013 resulted in one death and injuries to more than one hundred, including journalists. A showdown between Hefazat and the police a month later turned more violent, with thirty-six dead and sixty injured.<sup>7</sup> Hefazat has been quiet of late, but the possibility remains that they could mobilize.

The second area of concern which has emerged relates to the displaced, dispossessed Rohingya people. The government of Myanmar believes the Rohingya to be "Bengali-speaking Muslims" who came to Myanmar from Bangladesh; the government of Bangladesh believes the Rohingya are Muslims of Myanmar's Rakhine province just bordering southeast Bangladesh. Bangladesh has sheltered thirty thousand documented Rohingya refugees officially for some thirty years; UNHCR estimated the total number of undocumented at two hundred thousand, and some Bangladeshi estimates of total undocumented Rohingya refugees range as high as five hundred thousand. The issue has been the single most salient bilateral irritant between

<sup>5</sup> People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Communiqué issued on the Occasion of the Visit to India of Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh," January 12, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> See U.S. Department of Justice, "DOJ/OPDAI Counterterrorism Programs," <http://www.justice.gov/criminal/opsdat/crdoct-programs/cru.html>.

<sup>7</sup> David Bergman and Dean Nelson, "36 Killed in Dhaka as Islamic Militants Clash with Police," *the Telegraph (UK)*, May 6, 2013.

Bangladesh and Myanmar over the years.

Reports in Bangladesh and in India have identified an emerging concern about radicalization of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, including potential recruitment into terrorist groups. According to a report released in 2013 from the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, some Rohingya refugees have joined “hardline” Muslim organizations, and the report notes that the Rohingya Students Organization has formed a partnership with IUJL-B.<sup>8</sup> Reports have appeared in the Indian and Bangladeshi press that the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the Mumbai attacks of 2008, has been trying to recruit Rohingya refugees, including for potential attacks on India.<sup>9</sup>

Third, the dramatic spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State into Afghanistan and Ayman al-Zawahiri’s announcement last fall of a new “Indian Subcontinent” subsidiary of al-Qaeda have captured substantial attention. In January Bangladesh authorities arrested four men suspected of Islamic State membership. Last September, a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in Dhaka under charges of recruiting for the Islamic State.

What the official debut of “al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent” will mean is not yet clear. Al-Qaeda’s appeal has proven limited over the course of the last twenty years, and it is not certain that the mere declared ambition for a subcontinental al-Qaeda subsidiary stretching all the way to Bangladesh and Myanmar will attract many followers. But it is something to watch closely.

#### Recommendations for U.S. policy

The United States has good policies in place to cooperate with Bangladesh, including training and technical cooperation. But given Bangladesh’s situation of fragility discussed above, there are some areas I would recommend for additional attention. All U.S. assistance data discussed below comes from the FY2016 and FY2015 Congressional Budget Justification Appendix 3 documents, along with the FY2014 Executive Budget Summary for historical figures.

1. **Support the requested increase in resources focused on democracy and governance programs in U.S. assistance to Bangladesh—and consider supplementing further.** Bangladesh is widely regarded as a development success story, and a country where development investments deliver great returns. But the growth in U.S. assistance to Bangladesh has been concentrated in health, food security, and climate change. The resources available to provide democracy and governance support to Bangladesh are small compared with the outlays for those three categories. All of these are important, but it has become increasingly clear that attention to democracy and governance issues should be increased given the impact of the country’s political problems. The FY2016 request increases levels for rule of law and human rights, as well as political competition and consensus building, bringing them

<sup>8</sup> Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Mitra and Associates, and Saferworld, *Safety and Security in the South-East Border Area of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Saferworld, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Shishir Gupta, “Lashkar Radicalizes Rohingya to Wage War Against India,” *Hindustan Times*, August 2, 2013.

from a combined \$3 million in the FY2015 request to a combined \$9.8 million. Compared with \$71 million for health, \$50 million for food security, and \$17 million for climate change, there is room to do more.

*U.S. Foreign Assistance to Bangladesh*

(\$ in thousands)	FY2012 Actual	FY2013 Actual	FY2014 Actual	FY2015 Request	FY2016 Request
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>202,403</b>	<b>205,251</b>	<b>168,700</b>	<b>202,883</b>
Development Assistance	81,686	79,301	81,578	82,400	92,923
<i>Food Security—productivity</i>				50,000	50,000
<i>Food Security—competitiveness</i>				2,500	3,500
<i>Climate Change</i>				16,900	17,000
<i>Civil Society/Labor and Workplace Safety</i>				6,000	9,000
<i>Combat Trafficking in Persons</i>				1,000	1,100
<i>Rule of Law and Human Rights</i>				2,000	6,000
<i>Political Competition &amp; Consensus Building</i>				1,000	3,800
<i>Basic Education</i>				3,000	2,000
Foreign Military Financing (FMF)	2,200	2,848	2,500	2,000	2,000
Global Health Programs—USAID	71,600	74,005	79,500	78,200	71,200
International Military Education and Training (IMET)	994	1,067	996	1,500	1,500
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE)	1,394	2,000	2,600	1,250	2,000
Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR)		3,214	3,350	3,350	3,260
P.L. 480 Title II		39,967	34,527	-	3,600

*Data from FY2016 and FY2015 Congressional Budget Justification Appendix 3 Data;  
FY2012 Data from FY2014 Executive Budget Summary*

As another point of comparison, the FY2016 request for Pakistan (OCO) seeks \$36.1 million for conflict mitigation; \$9.6 million for rule of law and human rights; \$14.6 million for good governance; and \$4.9 million for political competition and consensus building, for a total of \$65.2 million in this general category. That is more than six and a half times the figure for the FY2016 request for Bangladesh. It is hard to understand why we cannot allocate even a little more to this important area of concern in Bangladesh.

2. **Continue and expand the growing U.S.-Bangladesh counterterrorism and security cooperation.** This has been an area of successful cooperation. Bangladesh seeks our assistance, is trying

to do more, and can benefit from our continued support. Relatively small amounts of assistance can go a long way, particularly on topics like community policing, anti-money laundering, counterterrorist financing, and strengthening capacity within the justice system. We should certainly continue support for efforts to reform Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion, a paramilitary force long accused of use of excessive force. This has been a program under the U.S. Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP)—one that is not large, and could be further supported.

Levels for security assistance (FIMF, IMIFT, INCLT, and NAIDR) were at \$8.1 million in the FY2015 request and are \$8.76 million in the FY2016 request. By comparison, the same budget request for Pakistan in the non-OCO account for FY2016 is almost \$61 million. I recognize that Pakistan's state of insecurity and its role in supporting operations in Afghanistan are a qualitatively different situation—and I am not including the additional \$265 million in FIMF in the OCO account—but it also strikes me that even doubling the support for security cooperation with Bangladesh would amount to a tiny fraction of what we provide to Pakistan.

3. **Deepen security consultation with India about Bangladesh.** Regular consultations covering security matters in South Asia should be continued and enhanced, especially given the developments discussed above (Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Rohingya radicalization), which India watches closely.
4. **Continue looking for ways to incentivize political reconciliation in Bangladesh.** Finding a way to bridge the chasm between Bangladesh's two major political parties, and the deep personal enmity that drives their differences, has proven Sisyphean. International mediation including by the UN has not succeeded. The United States should look for positive incentives to emphasize more robustly, such as the prospect of a Millennium Challenge Corporation threshold program, should Bangladesh reach a better situation of governance and law and order. A threshold program could incentivize further reforms leading to the possibility of a compact, which are much larger assistance levels than Bangladesh currently receives.

We should also, at every possible juncture, continue to impress upon the Bangladesh government as well as the opposition the enormous opportunity cost to the country from its ongoing political stalemate. Given its current circumstances, Bangladesh has moved far away from the projections made by investment banks Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan in 2005 and 2007, respectively. In those years, Bangladesh appeared among the Goldman Sachs "Next 11" countries to watch and as one of the JP Morgan "Frontier Five." Under present conditions, the outlook is much less positive. But it is a country with a spirit of entrepreneurship, great potential, and enormous unrealized promise still to come. A better political environment, and by that I mean one without violence, not necessarily one of partisan bonhomie, would position Bangladesh for great things.



Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much, and now members of the panel will have 5 minutes to ask questions.

I will begin with myself, but I am going to use part of my 5 minutes to give the opening statement that I would have given had we not turned immediately to the panel. But this is part of my 5 minutes so they can start the clock.

Bangladesh has long represented a moderate secular nation, as has been stated, which has worked hard to pull itself out of extreme poverty.

It has become an important security partner for the United States in the fight against terrorism and Islamic extremism in South Asia as well as a partner on humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping operations and maritime security.

However, ongoing political turmoil has plunged the nation in a political security crisis. While some have said that in Bangladesh this is politics as usual, I am afraid we are witnessing a troubling course of events.

When I was in Dhaka before the national elections last year, I met with both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, and I had met with them before previously when I had been there a number of years prior.

I met with both of them at that time, separately both times, and it was evident at that time that both sides sat at an impasse, which is still the case, unfortunately.

Sheikh Hasina insisted provisions were in place to conduct a fair election, and we know that didn't really happen. Following this past week's city council elections, which are now marred by evidence of irregularities and intimidation, I am concerned about the roiling violence that has increased since the beginning of the year and what this all means for Bangladesh's democratic tradition.

I believe Bangladesh has great potential, as the chairman mentioned in his opening statement, but it has much standing in the way of its continuing progress, as we have heard here this afternoon. I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony this afternoon. It has been very helpful to us. The things that the panel members have heard, we will convey to our colleagues who didn't have the opportunity to be here this afternoon. Also through our staffs, we will make sure that all the other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee are able to benefit from the testimony that we have heard here this afternoon and their written testimony will be made available as well.

Now, for just a couple of questions: There have been a string of high-profile murders of journalists, as was mentioned, and bloggers as well as mass killings of commuters in bus bomb attacks.

Outside of these headline-grabbing events, what does the situation actually look like on the ground in Bangladesh and how is it impacting the everyday life of the average person in Bangladesh? If you could all be very brief, I will just go down the line, and maybe start with you, Ms. Curtis, if I could.

Ms. CURTIS. Thank you. Yes, the political violence that occurred in January and February connected to the opposition protest demonstrations was very disruptive to the economy, to people's ability to get around. And what was particularly disturbing were the pet-

rol bombings on the buses, which caused hundreds of innocent bystanders to become burned or, you know, were killed.

So this was particularly disturbing, I think, to the average Bangladeshi that this was occurring.

With regard to the murders of the bloggers, I think this provokes a different kind of concern among the Bangladeshi people. The Bangladeshi people are proud of their Bengali traditions and they have been a largely peaceful, moderate, and pluralist society.

So when extremists are trying to disrupt that environment in Bangladesh, I think people become very concerned. But I would just point out there is a difference between those murders, which were by Islamist extremist groups, and the petrol bombings, which occurred as part of the political violence that was as a result of the opposition protests.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

Rather than go down the line, I have less than a minute so I would never have a chance. I wanted to get to at least one more question.

Let me give you another question and I will go to you, Dr. Riaz, and then down the line on this one. Is there any way that we can encourage the Awami League and the BNP to have constructive dialogue about alleviating the tension between those parties?

What role could the United States or any of the neighboring countries—India or China or Burma or anybody else—play to facilitate these reconciliations? I know that may sound kind of pie in the sky. We would probably all like that to happen. Is there any possibility of that happening, Dr. Riaz?

Mr. RIAZ. Thank you.

First of all, this is a problem that needs to be solved by Bangladeshis. It cannot be solved by outsiders. Having said that, the United States and the international community has a role to play.

Particularly, I think it will default and is a missed opportunity for Bangladeshis—you know, wasted; because there was a relative calm and that opportunity should have been taken. One more thing is you have mentioned and I think it is important to have the Indians having a role.

India has a role and a responsibility because it is the largest democracy and a neighbor; and also for security concerns because in Bangladesh, which is completely—you know, if the security situation deteriorates it is not going to help India in any way or fashion.

So with those in mind, I think this is important to press upon both parties that if it continues to be like this, continued violence perpetrated by parties, it is not going to help Bangladesh in terms of achieving its potential and they need to do it and that is why the interlocutors should be both domestic and international community.

And what the United States can do—is to encourage other parties such as India, such as the European Union to be involved and engage with the parties for coming up with a solution.

Mr. CHABOT. Okay. Thank you.

I will come back to the others if we go a second round. But I don't want to take up all the time. So I will now yield to the ranking member, Mr. Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you.

Everyone in this room is dedicated to the people of Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world and so there is a natural tendency in focusing economic policy to focus on what is good for Bangladesh.

Ms. Curtis advocated more imports for Bangladesh and more investment in Bangladesh by the United States, that investment basically being American companies figuring out how to make a big profit by creating a lot of jobs in Bangladesh rather than in the United States.

And so I would like to be a voice to point out that for every—that we have a five to one trade deficit with Bangladesh—that Germany exports three or four times as much to Bangladesh as we do and that we would have tens of thousands of more jobs in the United States if we had a balance trade relationship.

I expect that trade relationship to get much larger and I hope that the lopsided nature of it gets much smaller.

Mr. Fleischli, am I—Fleischli, is it true that in Bangladesh they have free trade zones where labor unions are restricted?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. I am not 100 percent sure if they are restricted from the zones. We operated in the zone.

Mr. SHERMAN. You operate in the zone?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Yes. We have organizations—

Mr. SHERMAN. I am told that labor unions are actually prohibited in those zones. You don't know whether they are or not?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. I am not sure if they are or not.

Mr. SHERMAN. But you know your own factories, of course, don't. Are you aware of any labor union operating in the zones?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. There is labor organizations that I have heard of.

Mr. SHERMAN. What?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. There is labor organizations that I have heard of operating within the zones.

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, labor organization is very different from a labor union. Dr. Riaz, the average parent in Bangladesh, if they want to send their kid to a secular school, is that provided by the government free? Are there fees? Or do you have to pay for your own student's books?

Mr. RIAZ. First of all, this is the major achievement in the past decade of Bangladesh, that they are provided education to everybody. Anyone. As a matter of fact, one of the major achievements is bringing the female children to schools. This is free.

Mr. SHERMAN. And it is free of any fee. What about books? Are the books free?

Mr. RIAZ. It is free, free for everybody.

Mr. SHERMAN. And the books are free?

Mr. RIAZ. The books are free and over the last years we have seen that the books are provided to the students on time, which is—which is an excellent achievement.

Before the school starts they do get the books, so this has been an achievement of the government, and over the years, over the decade actually, there are the females' stipend provided, which encouraged females to be in the schools. So significant achievement.

Mr. SHERMAN. I would point out that one focus of our foreign aid could be to provide those books to the Bangladeshi government.

That would give us some influence over content without going all the way to an American politically correct content and that it is—it is very hard to steal a book. Well, I mean you can—it is very hard for a corrupt official to make money stealing books as opposed to money.

Doctor, Bangladesh is a low-lying country. Sea levels are likely to rise. How big a problem is that?

Mr. RIAZ. It is a major problem. It is a major problem because of the environmental challenges. Bangladesh is at the forefront of the battle of the environmental disasters that we are anticipating and it was not the making of Bangladesh.

I mean, it is the front line of the environmental battle that the world should be fighting instead of leaving Bangladesh to fight alone.

Mr. SHERMAN. How much of its arable land is it likely to lose if we see a half a meter rise in sea levels?

Mr. RIAZ. There are variations in terms of the predictions—some even predicted up to one-third, but at least 10 to 13 percent of the low-lying lands might be lost if the sea level rises and, you know, the global warming, which is—which would be a disaster.

But let me take this opportunity just briefly that this is a battle of everyone's, here or there. It is not only a battle of Bangladesh.

Mr. SHERMAN. Dr. Riaz, I only get 5 minutes. I am going to move on to another question, if that is okay. My colleagues have heard me talk with passion about the—with the—about climate change.

Bangladesh suffers from a dysfunctional two-party system. The climate of repression is worsening. Is there any way short of a military takeover to resolve this situation?

Mr. RIAZ. Military takeover is not a solution.

Mr. SHERMAN. No, I didn't say that that was a solution.

Mr. RIAZ. So they have to. I mean, I am—at the end, I am optimistic to that extent that the Bangladeshis are resilient. Bangladeshis have faced adverse situations and that they have the ingenuity to come up with the solution. However, given the circumstances they will have to come up with solutions. Likelihood? If I say that—would I put my money on it at this point? No.

But there is no way without having a reconciliation, conversation, negotiation and that the international community needs to help. Again, they cannot impose a solution but they can facilitate and that if it is not facilitated, history tells that, obviously, this is not going to end in anyone's favor. The loser will be Bangladesh.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you.

Mr. CHABOT. The gentleman's time has expired.

We will go ahead into a second round now, so I will yield to myself for 5 minutes. Oh, I am sorry. I didn't see you there, Tulsi. My bad. Hawaii, Ms. Tulsi.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thanks all of you for being here.

Follow up on Mr. Sherman's question, what—given the political impasse that we are facing what is the likelihood of a military intervention or takeover and if that were to occur how would you see that? Given the dynamic now how would you see that play out? For whomever would like to answer.

Ms. CURTIS. I will just say quickly I think right now the chances of the military getting involved are pretty low and I think that is because of the previous experience when they did take the reins of power in 2007 for nearly 2 years and their image suffered from allegations of corruption.

And so I think this has made them less likely to want to step in unless, of course, things deteriorate significantly or violence increases tremendously. Then perhaps they would consider it. But I think right now they are not showing any signs of getting involved.

Ms. GABBARD. With regard to the—I know a couple of you spoke about the Islamic militancy or Islamic extremism that is there. To what extent do these groups have broader influence over the disaffected Bangladeshis or the broader community there?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. I will speak personally from my own experience. You know, this was part of my oral testimony that I couldn't get to.

You know, the issue that is at hand right now in Bangladesh is the situation is so chaotic and there is so much unknown and there are so many people that feel lost and discouraged that Bangladesh is turning into basically a breeding ground, if you will, for terrorist activity—ISIS—and God forbid, you know, if ISIS were to grab hold of 170 million people, you know, and that is at a very key interchange in South Asia for the United States of America.

Ms. GABBARD. Yes.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. And so as an American citizen, outside of business—as an American citizen that scares me to death. It absolutely scares me to death and it scares me for my friends and whom I would call family—that I have extended family in Bangladesh because it is so easy. It is so easy when you are in—falling on tough times and you are discouraged to be recruited. So it is concerning.

Ms. GABBARD. Mr. Kansara, I know you were there and you met with some of the moderate Muslim leaders there. If you could share your experience both on how the situation is really affecting the day to day lives but also with the moderate Muslim community is doing about this increased threat.

Mr. KANSARA. Thank you. In conjunction with Mr. Chabot's question, based on my observations of only being in Dhaka—unfortunately I could not travel to other parts of the country because it was just simply unsafe—Dhaka, the streets of Dhaka were completely empty.

The traffic—there was virtually no traffic and if anybody has been to Dhaka they told me that that is a complete anomaly. It would take you hours to travel from one mile to another as opposed to the minutes. And so businesses were directly affected.

Shops were completely shut down and you could—also of concern was that 60 million students, because of the hartals, were prevented from taking their exams.

That is almost disenfranchising economically an entire generation of Bangladeshis. And so this was a complete irresponsibility on the parties involved.

With regards to the moderate Muslim leaders whom we met with, one gentleman named Imran Sarker, who is a prominent secular activist and he is a practicing Muslim, he described his trepidation with increasing Islamisation of Bangladesh society saying

that Islam had been imposed upon them as opposed to a free choice of choosing religion and how much religion should be a part of their daily lives.

And the public school textbooks were also increasingly showing signs of radicalization by referencing Islamic followers of Islam over other religions and this was—had direct implications for communal harmony and religious freedom.

And in an interview that he gave at the Business Standard, an Indian publication, he said that he is actually now under threat by Islamist forces. So moderate Muslim leaders are also under threat by the same—by the same perpetrators of violence against Avijit Roy and Washikur Rahman.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you. Dr. Ayres, I think you had wanted to add some comment on this.

Ms. AYRES. I just wanted to say that I do think it is probably difficult to ascertain what percentage of the general population has a more radical view, and certainly Bangladesh has not been a radical country. It has been a place of great moderation.

But the real issue here is that it only takes a few people to cause great chaos. So if you look at the kind of explosions that took place in 2005, you have a small cell that can affect something that is hugely consequential for the country.

The murders of these three bloggers that have just taken place, you know, the people who have been arrested are small cells of two and four people, again, who don't seem to be part of any sort of larger organized groups, sort of small groups who are, you know, directed by their cleric. That is the trial going on right now.

So, again, I do think there are people who are overall largely moderate but there are small cells of people that we do need to worry about.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. The gentlelady yields back and, again, my apologies for the oversight.

We will now go into a second round. When I was last in Bangladesh, which was shortly before the elections—on my way back, actually on the plane, I believe—I do a blog every week and I happened to do it on Bangladesh since I had just been there. Interestingly enough, it got more hits—more people were interested in that particular blog than anything I have done in about 5 or 6 years since I started the blog. Every week I do it, and so I am not sure exactly why that was, but it was a fact.

There are a lot of people, obviously, in Bangladesh—about half the population of the U.S. squeezed into a country about the size of Iowa or even a little smaller than Iowa—so you can still read that if you would like to.

It is on my blog. All the old ones are on there now. I do have an official blog and a political blog, but I keep that on the political blog. It is there if you ever want to go back and read what I thought about this 2 years ago.

The thing that struck me shortly before the election and my understanding was the polling was showing that Khaleda Zia was likely to win the election, but ultimately, you know, they couldn't come to an agreement and it seemed to be over the issue of a caretaker government.

A lot of times in the past, there have been caretaker governments that took over the elections that were held, so that they could make sure that one side or the other wasn't being unfair with the other side.

It seemed to work relatively well, but this time that didn't happen and so we see what we saw after the elections. I was actually a bit surprised that the violence wasn't even more after the election.

In any event, it is what it is. What role did that caretaker government versus not having one have in this election and what we ended up with? Dr. Ayres, would you want to comment on that?

Ms. AYRES. Well, that, certainly, has been the most important point of dispute over the course of the last nearly 2 years because the disagreement over how to carry out the election of January 5, 2014. The run-up to that election, actually, this disagreement was well known.

In fact, that was the period where you saw a lot of Bangladeshis trying to bring both parties together to discuss. There is a quite famous—famous among Bangladeshis—transcript of a telephone conversation that took place.

Yes, you probably read it at the time where, unable to even agree among the two leaders of the political parties who should call whom first—really intensive enmity there.

So they have continued to focus on this as the point of disagreement when in fact, I mean, if they were to reach an agreement on some mechanism, whether it is an institutionalized Bangladesh election commission that adheres to all forms of free and fair elections or a caretaker government, I mean, ultimately it doesn't matter what they choose as long as they agree and the elections are carried out in a free and fair and transparent manner.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

Mr. Fleischli, let me turn to you, if I can at this point.

Sometime—well, a few years ago—I don't remember the exact date, but two of the major items that were in the world news were the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse, when over 1,100 people, I believe, were killed, another 2,500 were injured and these were mostly women is my recollection. And the other was the Tazreen fashion factory fire and it was over 100—I think it was 117—that were killed and another 200-plus were injured in that.

And there was a lot of attention of the condition that a lot of these factories there were under and the unsafe things.

And the argument here was U.S. companies, you know, if we are doing business and importing progress and we have a, if not a legal responsibility, a moral responsibility in making sure that people that are making these products, which are ultimately coming here to the United States and purchased by American citizens that we have a responsibility to make sure that it is safe.

And you could argue who knew what when and I am sure that—all kinds of lawsuits involved in that. But what improvements or what changes were made as a result of those two horrific occurrences?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Well, I think initially and even up until today you have got two major groups that were formed. You have got the alli-

ance and the accord. One is on the European side and one is on the American side.

You know, those two entities are made up of basically the largest retailers and the largest brands in the world. It took, I think, gathering that power, which is huge buying power, and they import billions of dollars from Bangladesh to be able to start the path to change and bring recognition to what is going on on the ground in Bangladesh.

You know, as a CEO in Bangladesh back around—between 2007 and 2012, approximately, you know, we did business with the largest retailers. Our internal safety regulations were very strict.

You know, a lot of the safety and the security regulations that are—that are—that we had in place mirrored and/or exceeded—I won't name the retailers but the largest retailers that are out there—and luckily, because of me being American and me being face to face with the buyers all the time and the customers and listening to that their concerns are, I was able to always ensure that when I was at the factory I could physically inspect.

You know, I was more of a hands-on kind of CEO as opposed to the desk CEO. So I would walk the floors all the time. I would make sure that the fire extinguishers were there.

I would make sure that the doors were open, that we had plenty of escapes and, you know, that we didn't have floors overloaded and, you know, people couldn't trip on things on the floor.

And it was very, very important for me to do that because our business counted on it and the people's lives counted on it, and that was pre-Tazreen and Rana Plaza.

So when those two events occurred, it was absolutely devastating, and I can feel their pain. You are right, 90-plus percent of the employees—the workers were female.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much. My time has expired.

Ms. Gabbard.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will just ask one follow-up, just following up on the counter terrorism subject matter.

I understand that Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion has been effective in counter terrorism efforts but that they have also been known to be used by the government to attack political opponents.

So I am wondering if you can comment on how you can reach both objectives of curtailing the abusive power but also recognizing if this is an effective asset to counter these extremist elements. How do you see that playing out?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. If you don't mind, I will just make one quick comment. As it pertains to whether it is the Rapid Action Battalion or the military or even just the police, you know, the police itself, generally speaking from my understanding, is trained and funded here in the U.S., so by U.S. taxpayer dollars.

A lot of the military is as well. The RAB, I believe, is done through the U.N. and heavily funded by the U.S. I wanted to give you an example.

I was leaving a hotel in Chittagong, the Peninsula Hotel in Chittagong, 1 year and it had in my van on the way to the factory two people from one of the largest retailers in the world—senior executives.



And no more than 5 minutes after we left—and there was traffic then, the roads were absolutely packed and it does take an hour to get a mile—one of the members of RAB, and you can clearly see them—they are in a blue uniform.

It says RAB on the back of them and I have been told that they are the elite of the elite out there—took and beat the living you know what out of a normal ordinary citizen because he crossed the street at the wrong time.

The buyers that were sitting next to me were, like, what the—was that, and I—I will apologize, you know, let us discuss it a little bit later, and I will tell you it wasn't 3 months later that those buyers were barred from travelling to Bangladesh anymore.

And then so that is a—it is a very serious concern and I indirectly, we, as Americans, have an impact directly in how that happens.

Ms. GABBARD. Impacted. Yes. Dr. Riaz.

Mr. RIAZ. The most—

Mr. CHABOT. Just a clarification. They were barred by the Bangladeshi government?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. No, no, no, no, no. Barred by—barred by the corporation and—yes. Yes. For their safety and security, correct.

Mr. RIAZ. In terms of RAB's record both—we will have to take both these things, right—their success in terms of dealing with, you know, terrorism but also their human rights records is very poor—absolutely abysmal that we need to take into account and given the circumstances, the most important element in accountability, unless this force or for that matter any force, is accountable and that you cannot tie in simply.

You know, one institution cannot be accountable when the whole system is not accountable and this is how it is, you know, in some ways they are connected to each other. Overall point—that is why an accountable governance is necessary that will ensure that this kind of heavy-handedness or the RAB's poor record of human rights, abuse can be addressed through an institutional arrangement.

And if I may, just quickly, going back to what Dr. Ayres had mentioned in regard to this, there is a difference. The point is caretaker government or the election commission is mostly to have an institution that can protect your rights to vote in a free and fair manner.

Caretaker government is not a solution. Solution is to build an institution which Bangladesh has not succeeded yet. Thank you.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you. Dr. Ayres.

Ms. AYRES. Just a quick comment on the question of the RAB. The United States government has been interested in trying to help RAB carry out internal reforms and through the U.S. Department of Justice program has helped support a project to build an internal investigation capacity there.

So there are programs that the United States can support to help Bangladesh reach more capable processes internally and help solve some of these problems. We have also supported police training programs.

I visited the National Police Academy in Rajshahi a few years ago when I was serving in government, and we have supported pro-

grams that helped train them to focus more on community policing instead of thinking about, you know, use the stick first.

Rather, treat the community as those you protect and serve and eschew the use of violence first. So there are methods we can use in support to try to bring about reforms.

Ms. GABBARD. Right. Dr. Riaz, your point is well taken, though, about accountability. If you don't have an institution set up where there is, you know, transparency and justice and accountability then there is still far too much room for abuse.

Thank you.

Mr. SHERMAN. Mr. Kansara, people say that as you move further east from the Middle East that Islam gets more moderate and that in any case Bangladeshis are moderate in their approach to Islam.

Can you explain what has driven the recent ethnic persecution of Hindus and how do—and does the Hindu community in Bangladesh back one party or the other?

Mr. KANSARA. So answering the first part of your question initially, it is fairly well known that the Hindu community by and large will support the Awami League because the Awami League has policy platforms that are set to roll back the Islamisation of the country—the encroachments of Islam in the constitution.

They have made it a party platform to roll back those restrictions on other religious communities.

Now, with regards to moderate Islamic movements within the—within South Asia or Bangladesh in particular, specifically with regards to Jamaat, the Jamaat-e-Islami is a Muslim Brotherhood-linked organization. They have direct ties.

In fact, I believe Mohamed Morsi had visited Bangladesh while he was president of the Muslim Brotherhood and had met with Jamaat leaders there. And their brand of Islam is very similar to that of the Wahabis and the Salafis and they are simply—they are simply interested in creating an Islamic State in Bangladesh.

It is part of their charter and it is part of their organization's methodology and the attacks that they have perpetrated on the citizens of Bangladesh and in conjunction with either banned terrorist organizations or other organizations like Islami Chhatra Shibir are set to intimidate the average Bangladeshi into being subjugated to that form of thought.

Mr. SHERMAN. My own images of Jamaat is at the fringes of thought in Bangladesh. Do these extremist views have widespread support or are we talking about Hindus living in fear of a tiny extremist groups that means them harm?

Mr. KANSARA. Based on our observations and interactions with Hindu community leaders in Bangladesh, Jamaat and Jamaat's ideology is growing amongst the general population and I would say that Jamaat—it was palpable the financial power they have in Bangladesh.

There is a—there is a list I found online before this hearing of over 20 financial insurance institutions, banks and several other power-wielding organizations that Jamaat funds and finances and that money, I don't think, is coming from the farms of Bangladesh.

I think it is coming from foreign sources like Saudi Arabia or even Pakistan's ISI.

Mr. SHERMAN. I yield back.

Mr. SALMON. Thank you.

Mr. Fleischli, I am going to ask my question directly at you. As some of the witnesses have noted, the World Bank estimates that the unrest in Bangladesh has had a cumulative negative effect of nearly \$2 billion in just the last few years alone.

So will companies continue to do business in Bangladesh if violence continues? That is my first question. Second, what, if anything, has the business community done to engage with the government to relay these concerns?

And then has the government been responsive? And then finally, if trends continue what will the business community do? Thank you.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Thank you for the question.

You know, I—to step back for a little bit, I saw a huge growth in the business from '07 to 2012. Most of that transferred from China and other countries. Following—after 2012, it started to dwindle down. The past 2 years it is dropping dramatically.

Mr. SALMON. How do we keep that growth rate at 6.2 percent GDP growth rate with that dwindling?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. I—to be honest, I have no idea.

Mr. SALMON. Do you believe the numbers?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. No.

Mr. SALMON. Okay. Go on.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Because I have been witness of a number of retailers that have moved mass amounts of orders outside of Bangladesh—places like Africa, Vietnam, Thailand, back to China again where it is three, four, five times more expensive to make something.

But they are doing that because of security. They are doing that for safety. They are doing that to ensure that they are going to get the goods.

Right now, with the situation that is at hand, you can't even get product from Dhaka down to Chittagong where it needs to ship. It is almost impossible, and there are so many factories in Dhaka. There is lots of factories in Chittagong.

But Chittagong relies on Dhaka for a lot of materials, right, while Dhaka relies on Chittagong to get the containers out.

So unless things change, you are going to see a continual drop and, unfortunately, that goes back to the whole issue of people feeling like they are lost and disconcerted and everything because you have got two parties that are warring with each other and there is no answers that are coming up. Business is going away. Factories are closing.

Retail shops are closing because they have nothing to sell in their shops anymore because they can't get goods from, you know, up the road. I fear, unfortunately, that if there are not immediate steps taken to improve the situation in Bangladesh that Bangladesh will not be the growth opportunity that I know it can be and that it once was. And that is scary.

Mr. SALMON. So other than your testimony today, what is the business community doing to relay those concerns to the government? Is there a dialogue going on?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. As far as I know, they discuss with people in the different NGOs within Bangladesh. My goal, as part of UBTRA, is

to help engage some of those organizations, bring them in as membership and help guide them through the process and hopefully if we can all build together a big enough group of support maybe we can make that change. Maybe we can help.

Mr. SALMON. Is there a very robust chamber of commerce—the American Chamber of Commerce?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. It is not very robust.

Mr. SALMON. No?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. As far as I know. It is—I mean, it is there. It is in place. I don't know that it is that active.

Mr. SALMON. In the dialogue that the business community has had with the government, is it responsive at all? Do they give you any reassurances that they are trying to work on it or moving in the right direction?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. You hear many things.

Mr. SALMON. Mostly excuses or—

Mr. FLEISCHLI. It is mostly just talk. Yes, we are making these improvements but you never see the improvements. You know, I would—I would question the legitimacy of how many factories have actually passed inspections that they say have passed inspections and I would question that legitimacy.

Mr. SALMON. So this is a really tough one. On a scale of one to ten—

Mr. FLEISCHLI. That is why I am saying being on the ground and actually seeing things is so important—to be there and see what is going on and experience what is going on, and not just read what the media says or what the government says or anything like that because being on the ground is a lot different.

Mr. SALMON. On a scale of one to 10, how optimistic are you that things will turn around, both in the near term and the long term? And the long term is probably hard to predict but—

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Yes. Near term? I would like to be more optimistic but, you know, it is—you are probably 50/50. I mean, it is one way or the other and I think really the only way that you are going to get a teeter in the right positive direction is if we, as the United States, step in and play a bigger part in helping bring both parties of the government, or I should say the government and the opposing party, together to clean the slate and start fresh and get free and fair elections up and running and turn Bangladesh back into a democratic society. It is not. You know, it is not a democratic society. It is falling apart.

Mr. SALMON. When I showed some transparency in what we were going to discuss in this hearing, as we are required to do, you know, some tried to tell me I was all wet and I was moving in the wrong direction and that things are wonderful and that the growth rate is phenomenal and that everything is under control and, you know, what we are hearing today is that is not accurate, is it? I mean, Ms. Curtis, what do you think?

Ms. CURTIS. Yes. First, I just wanted to quickly comment there is a U.S.-Bangladesh Business Council here at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Ms. Ayres and I were invited to speak about 1½ years ago when there were a lot of political tensions in the run-up to the January 2014 elections. At that time I would say there was about maybe 15 U.S. business representatives with interest in Ban-

gladesh that were willing to join in a letter expressing their concerns about the political environment and how it was affecting business. So I think there is serious interest.

Mr. SALMON. Did they do that?

Ms. CURTIS. I think they did, in the end. I don't know—

Mr. SALMON. I would love to get a copy of that letter if there is any way to do that. I mean, that would be really helpful for my purposes.

Ms. CURTIS. Okay. We can follow up with that.

Mr. SALMON. That would be really helpful. Because I think that, you know, it is all about due process. I think that it is important for the business community to convey that this is hurting you more than anybody, Bangladesh, and that if things don't turn around there will be a pretty—like you said, Mr. Fleischli, a pretty substantial exodus of economic opportunity—business—and that will only make things work.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. To be honest, I think the only thing that is really keeping any kind of growth aspect, if you want to call it that, in Bangladesh from an export standpoint is the fact that some form of GSP or tariff consideration is in place with Canada and Europe and it is very significant. That is really the only thing that is a saving grace right now because—

Mr. SALMON. Is it possible to get—you know, insure your product because of some of the security concerns?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. You can insure your product, sure. Yes. I mean, that is definitely a possibility. It is not necessarily—

Mr. SALMON. The rates are probably going to go through the roof.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Well, it is not necessarily the security of the product. It is am I going to get the materials on time to make the product, to get it out the door on time to meet the ship dates that the retailers are looking for.

Mr. SALMON. Right.

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Because if you don't meet those ship dates—

Mr. SALMON. You lose.

Mr. FLEISCHLI [continuing]. Consistently—

Mr. SALMON. Yes, you lose.

Mr. FLEISCHLI [continuing]. You lose the business and it goes to somebody else and if that consistently happens within a single country that you are importing from it is time to look elsewhere, and I—you know, when I first started running the factories in 2007 and we started building a new factory in 2008, beautiful brand new factory in 2008, and we grew the business, you know, from \$0 to \$40 million in 3 years is not—you know, it is not an easy thing to do.

And then to see what is happening today and to see the mass exodus of the businesses is just discouraging. It really is, and it is saddening because, you know, the workers in Bangladesh are so happy—they are so happy to have jobs.

They are so happy to work, and that the situation is such that, you know, they are the ones that are getting impacted the worst.

Mr. SALMON. Yes, Dr. Ayres?

Ms. AYRES. A very quick supplement to that. If you look at the economic data both for the garment industry and Bangladesh overall, despite all the political unrest, in the last year—last year's

Bangladesh fiscal year actually saw a growth in the garment industry by about 14 percent.

Now, that is not going to be the case for this year and we are going to start seeing that data come in. So that does explain why if you look historically the growth hadn't been ticking down.

Mr. SALMON. Got it.

Ms. AYRES. It is now beginning to tick down so we are seeing that now.

Mr. SALMON. That is very helpful.

This has been a wonderful panel and I—did you have another question? I was just—I was just going to say that if there is any closing comments that any of you would like to make, questions that haven't been asked, points that need to be made, then you are more than willing to make them—I'm more than happy to have you make them.

Mr. Kansara.

Mr. KANSARA. Thank you. In addition to the question that Mr. Sherman asked about the parties and I would say that the Hindu community also noted the severe security failings that had taken place by the Awami League government as well as by police forces in protection in the run-up to the election of 2013 and 2014 as well as Washikur Rahman and Avijit Roy were killed in broad daylight with police very close nearby.

Avijit Roy was killed at the Dhaka Book Fair and police were within walking distance away. And when a machete-wielding assailant is killing you it takes time. It is not—it is not a gunshot, and therefore the security forces failed. So should—the Awami League should not simply rely on the Hindu community as vote bank because that is not their role.

Their role is to protect all Bangladeshi citizens if they are in the government and the same with the BNP or any other party that it is in power.

Mr. SALMON. Any other comments?

Mr. FLEISCHLI. Just a quick one. On Avijit Roy, there is actually a picture that I saw on the Internet where Avijit Roy was on the ground and the event was occurring and there was a police officer standing right there doing nothing—absolutely nothing.

Mr. SALMON. Thank you. Ms. Curtis, did you have one—

Ms. CURTIS. Yes. I just wanted to make one last comment. It was raised earlier, the suggestion of declaring the Jamaat-e-Islami a foreign terrorist organization and I think that would be extremely unhelpful.

The Jamaat-e-Islami has participated in the electoral process. They have tended not to receive a great deal of votes. I think it was 4 to 5 percent in the last election that they ran in in 2008.

But the point is that, certainly, those guilty of violence should be prosecuted but there is simply no indication that the Jamaat-e-Islami as a political party has engaged in terrorism—systematic terrorism.

Mr. SALMON. Thank you. That is helpful. Dr. Ayres.

Ms. AYRES. A very brief ending comment: For many years I have always believed that Bangladesh provides a kind of living counterfactual to the problems that we see in a country like Pakistan.

They, obviously, separated in 1971. But in the intervening decades Bangladesh has gone on to deliver so much for its citizens. It has better human development indicators on almost every count than Pakistan does—in fact, better than India in many counts as well.

So for me this is a huge opportunity and an opportunity cost. I believe it is important for the United States to stay engaged and not use sanctions as a means of trying to teach a lesson but rather to try to shape the way we engage with Bangladesh and impress upon them how much potential they have and how we want to support that.

Mr. SALMON. Would all of you agree with that idea? Okay.

That is very helpful. You know, I want to say—I am about to conclude the committee—but this committee hearing was not intended to just pile on.

It really is about a constructive, better way, and it is not to cast aspersions on a country but to liberate a people. It is about lifting, not pulling down. I mean, that is what we are trying to accomplish here.

We are not trying to just throw rocks and criticize. What we are about is trying to shed some light on what the truth is—what is the truth beyond the spin-zone—what is the truth and what can America do to help improve the lives of the people of Bangladesh and that is what this is about.

So thank you so much for your patience and thank you for your testimony, and without objection the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:10 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]





## A P P E N D I X

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MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE**  
**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

**Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**  
**Matt Salmon (R-AZ), Chairman**

April 29, 2015

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific in Room 2255 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov>):

**DATE:** Thursday, April 30, 2015

**TIME:** 2:00 p.m.

**SUBJECT:** Bangladesh's Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism

**WITNESSES:** Ms. Lisa Curtis  
Senior Research Fellow, Asian Studies Center  
The Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy  
The Heritage Foundation

Ali Riaz, Ph.D.  
Chair, Department of Politics and Government  
Illinois State University

Mr. Jay Kansara  
Director  
Government Relations  
Hindu American Foundation

Mr. Steven D. Fleischli  
President  
U.S.-Bangladesh Trade and Relations Association

Alyssa Ayres, Ph.D.  
Senior Fellow for India, Pakistan, and South Asia  
Council on Foreign Relations

**By Direction of the Chairman**

*The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.*

# COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Asia and the Pacific HEARING

Day Thursday Date 04/30/15 Room 2255

Starting Time 2:00pm Ending Time 4:10pm

Recesses 1 (2:40 to 3:17) ( to ) ( to ) ( to ) ( to ) ( to )

## Presiding Member(s)

*Matt Salmon*

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☐

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Stenographic Record ☐

Televised ☐

## TITLE OF HEARING:

*Bangladesh's Fracture: Political and Religious Extremism*

## SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*Steve Chabot, Scott Perry*

*Brad Sherman, Grace Meng, Tulsi Gabbard*

## NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an \* if they are not members of full committee.)

*Bill Keating*

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

## STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

*Gerry Connolly*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_

or

TIME ADJOURNED 4:10pm

*[Signature]*  
Subcommittee Staff Director

**Statement for the Record**  
*Submitted by Mr. Connolly of Virginia*

Political intransigence is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Nor are accusations of power consolidation unique to the current government. The Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have repeatedly traded blows as both have moved in and out of power over the past several decades.

However, the current trajectory Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia have set the country on should be concerning for U.S. interests in Bangladesh and in the region. A preoccupation with political retribution and past grievances has distracted successive governments from the challenges currently facing Bangladesh.

The U.S. needs a partner, regardless of the ruling party, that does not diminish the government's ability to provide security and economic opportunity for the people of Bangladesh. A partner that promotes the rule of law, labor protections, respect for human rights, and climate change resilience will strengthen democratic institutions and engender faith in good governance. We undermine our own robust counterterrorism activities in Bangladesh and South Asia by failing to address the dysfunction that creates disaffected populations, and protecting the viability of a secular democracy among the fourth largest Muslim population in the world is a worthy pursuit in its own right.

The recent municipal elections in Dhaka and Chittagong were seen by some, including the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, as an opportunity to advance the cause of Bangladeshi democracy by way of free and fair elections. Instead, the elections have become a platform for further grievances through yet another election boycott by the BNP and reports of voter intimidation and voting irregularities. Instead of serving as a confidence building measure, the dysfunction of the elections could drive a further wedge between the AL and BNP and perpetuate the hartals and violent clashes that have already claimed 120 lives and injured hundreds more.

The U.S. must remain vigilant that a breakdown in the political sphere does not bleed into the commitment Bangladesh has made to joint counterterrorism activities. The U.S. and Bangladesh have signed a Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative, and the Department of State has certified Bangladesh's good performance in combatting terrorism. At the same time, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has publicly identified South Asia and Bangladesh as an area for possible growth for his transnational terrorist organization, and, in recent months, violent extremists have continued a campaign of brutal attacks against bloggers who do not share their radical religious views by murdering Washiqur Rahman Babu and Avijit Roy. To combat these extremist influences, the government has focused on communication to youth and developed a national curriculum for madrassas.

One area where the government could exercise effective oversight and create the kind of economic opportunity that insulates individuals from the influence of terrorism is by

strengthening workers' rights, particularly in the nation's garment industry. The industry employs 3 million people in Bangladesh and accounts for 80% of the country's export revenue. We recently observed the second anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse that killed more than 1,100 workers and resulted in civil unrest. Since the tragedy, 2,500 factories have been inspected and more than 300 new trade unions have been registered. However, the government still carries out limited responses to unfair labor practices, potentially marginalizing garment workers and their union leaders.

We have seen weak governance cede ground to violent extremism the world over, and do not want to repeat this destructive model in Bangladesh. There are currently too many stakeholders who stand to gain from warring political parties. The U.S. must help break the cycle of political deadlock by refocusing the country's leadership on government services and core responsibilities. Only then can the people of Bangladesh realize the full benefits of democratic governance.