
BANGLADESH IN 2005

Standing at a Crossroads

_____ Ali Riaz
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Abstract

After an eventful year, Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. Islamist challenges, a crisis of governance, and the absence of the rule of law were the defining characteristics of 2005. The question Bangladeshis can hardly avoid any longer is: will the nation drag itself into a cul-de-sac?

The year 2005 was eventful, momentous, and perhaps indicative of things to come. Militant Islamists demonstrated their strengths and the extent of their network. The main party of the ruling coalition is failing to rein in its Islamist partners, while opposition political parties struggle to form a viable alliance. Extrajudicial killings with the sanction of the government are on the rise, and minorities, particularly Ahmadiyyas, are facing virulent persecution.

Militant Islamists Demonstrate Strength

The most significant events of the year were the incidences of suicide bombings, unprecedented phenomena in the history of Bangladesh. The near-simultaneous attacks on November 29 at law courts in the major port of Chittagong and Gazipur, a small town north of the capital, killed at least nine people including two lawyers and sent a message that Islamist militants in Bangladesh have adopted suicide bombing as a new tactic in their campaign to terrorize the nation. It is also clear that the militants have targeted judges: these attacks came within weeks of the death of two judges in a bomb attack in a southern city. Gazipur experienced another suicide attack on December 1 followed by one in the northern district of Netrokona on December 8 that killed at least seven people.

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Asian Survey, Vol. 46, Issue 1, pp. 107–113, ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X.
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These incidents came as Bangladesh was still reeling from a series of bomb blasts on August 17, when within the space of 45 minutes at least 450 bombs exploded in 63 out of the country's 64 districts. A banned militant Islamist organization, Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Organization of the Holy Warriors, JMB), claimed responsibility for these well-coordinated attacks. Leaflets found near the blast sites demanded that Islamic rule be established soon. Although the loss of life was minimal—only three people—the Islamist group behind the attacks fully achieved its goal: to attract the attention of the government and the people while demonstrating the strength and reach of its network. This event showed that the government's continuous denial of the existence of such organizations has allowed them to spread.

These attacks came six months after a halfhearted government crackdown in late February on two militant organizations—the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (Awakened Muslim People of Bangladesh, JMJB), led by Bangla Bhai, and the JMB, led by Abdur Rahman—and the arrest of a number of activists including a university professor. After the August 17 attacks, intelligence agencies discovered a well-organized network of militant Islamists supported by a number of international Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The leaders of the ruling coalition initially pointed their fingers toward the opposition and external forces, particularly India.¹ Prime Minister Khaleda Zia cut short her visit to China but waited three weeks to make any public statement. The initial drive to catch the masterminds of the attacks and dismantle their networks slowed down within months, as links between members of the ruling coalition and the shadowy militants began to be revealed. For example, Mufti Abdul Hannan, leader of the Harkat-ul Jihad (Symbols of Jihad), a militant Islamist organization connected to a similar Pakistani militant group, who was sentenced in 2003 in absentia to life imprisonment and arrested on October 1, 2005, claimed that he had been given assurances by the former home minister that he could safely stay within the country.² In apparent retaliation to his arrest, militants attacked five local courts in three districts two days later and vowed to stage more attacks. The government finally banned the organization on October 17.

Politics: Business as Usual

Despite the unprecedented and well-coordinated bomb blasts, the political arena experienced no changes at all: squabbling between the two major politi-

1. "RAW Behind Blasts, Claims Nizami," *New Age* [Dhaka], August 21, 2005, p. 1. The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) is the external intelligence service of the Indian government.

2. "Mufti Hannan Captured: Militant Kingpin Tells of Altaf's Assurance of 'No Fear,'" *Daily Star* [Dhaka], October 2, 2005. Mufti Hannan was convicted by a court in 2003 for attempting to kill then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2000.

cal parties—the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League (AL)—continued, with both parties regularly trading insults. The eighth Parliament, which entered into its last year in October, seems to have already embraced a slow death. After returning to the Parliament in May 2004 for a brief period, the AL resumed its boycott. The ruling party has shown very little interest in bringing back the opposition, and the AL leadership is not eager to negotiate. If the growing crisis of governance had initially given the AL and other opposition parties hope that they would be able to mount strong street agitations to unseat the government, the demonstrations have yet to materialize for many reasons, including public apathy for another popular uprising, lack of vision among opposition parties, and intra-party hostility. However, the 23-point common program declared by the opposition alliance in late November 2005 that pledged to establish a country free from communal politics and extremism has drawn public attention.

However, the opposition's suspicion that a free and fair election may not be possible under the present system is both justifiable and ironic. Most of the by-elections held since 2001 have demonstrated that the Election Commission (EC) is unable to act independently; recent measures to politicize the EC confirm this suspicion.³ Ironically, it was the AL in 1995 that insisted on instituting a caretaker government instead of reforming the EC.⁴ Against this backdrop, the AL, along with a number of political parties, is demanding major changes in the formation and jurisdiction of the caretaker government, the functioning of the EC, and the electoral laws.⁵ The most important changes include the suggestion to appoint the chief advisor by consensus and assigning the Defense Ministry to the caretaker government. The ruling party has rejected the proposal but suggested that the opposition should present their recommendations to Parliament.

The only glimmer of hope during the year was the relatively peaceful election of the Chittagong city corporation in May 2005. The mayoralty of the country's second largest city went to the AL for the third time in a row. The ruling party graciously accepted the results.

3. "Politicization of EC: 150 JCD Men Made Election Officials," *ibid.*, September 21, 2005, p. 1.

4. The Thirteenth Amendment of the Bangladesh Constitution, passed in 1996, stipulates that upon dissolution of Parliament at the end of its term, an 11-member, non-party caretaker government headed by the chief advisor will function as an interim government for 90 days. The amendment provides that the immediate chief justice would be the head of the caretaker government, which will be dissolved on the day a new prime minister assumes office. In 1995, when the AL demanded that the caretaker government be included in the Constitution, many analysts suggested that this would not guarantee fair elections, arguing instead that the EC, the independent constitutional body, should be strengthened and freed from the influence of the executive branch. AL leaders rejected the idea at that time.

5. "AL, Allies Announce Agenda for Caretaker, EC Reforms," *ibid.*, July 16, 2005, p. 1.

Law and Order: Extrajudicial Killings and Persecution of Minorities

Violent crime increased in 2005. The highest-profile incident was the assassination of the former finance minister and opposition parliament member, Shah A. A. M. S. Kibria. Kibria was killed along with four others in a grenade attack on January 27 after speaking at a public rally in the northeastern district of Habiganj. Police charged 10 activists of the BNP a month later. Members of Kibria's family have rejected the charge sheet, saying that the investigation is incomplete. Family members of the main accused, Abdul Quaiyum, assert his innocence and allege that he is a victim of intra-BNP feuding. In April a court sentenced 22 people to death, the highest number in a single case, for murdering an opposition Parliament member last year. The parliamentarian, Ahsanullah Master, and another person were gunned down in May 2004 in a public rally. Most of the convicted are members of the BNP or its ally, the Jatiya Party (JP). Six others were given life sentences.

Although these incidents demonstrate the necessity of strengthening the rule of law, the government moved in the opposite direction, intensifying extrajudicial killings. Between January and September 2005, at least 324 people were killed by members of different law enforcement agencies, a figure three times higher than the previous year's. A total of 283 of these persons were killed in "crossfire," mostly at the hands of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). In the face of international criticism, the government declared in May that it would conduct an executive enquiry into the deaths. This turned out to be a whitewash.

The Ahmadiyyas⁶ came under virulent attack from the Khatme Nabuwat (Preservation of the Finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad, KN), an umbrella organization of Islamist groups, who demanded that Ahmadiyyas be declared non-Muslims. The government, especially the police and local authorities, not only tolerated the KN but also helped its activists pull down signboards of Ahmadiyya mosques. In June, KN activists set fire to an Ahmadiyya mosque in Brahmanbaria, and over two dozen bombs exploded there, leaving two persons injured.

Judiciary: Elusive Independence

The separation of the judiciary and the executive, an issue that has dragged on since 1999, has yet to be effected. In February 2005, the Supreme Court expressed its surprise that a draft document sent to the president by civil servants for approval was inconsistent with the Supreme Court's directives. Six months

6. These are members of a Sunni subset of less than 150,000, who have been living in Bangladesh since the 1900s. They are the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, a reformist, and are also referred to as Quadianis.

later, as the government sought an extension for necessary measures for the separation of the judiciary and the executive for the 21st time, the exasperated court rejected the plea and set February 1, 2006, as the date for hearing contempt of court proceedings. The increasing assertiveness of the judiciary was also reflected in a verdict on August 29, 2005, in which the High Court declared that the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution—indemnifying actions taken under martial law between August 15, 1975, and April 9, 1979—was illegal.⁷ Although in practical terms the judgment has very little significance, it provided a moral victory to opponents of the present regime because the amendment was made by Ziaur Rahman, founder of the BNP. The government wasted no time in seeking a stay order, which was later extended until the end of January 2006.

The attorney general resigned in April 2005 on “health grounds.” Press reports have suggested that he quit under pressure from the ruling party as a result of his close links with a human rights organization and differences with policy-makers.⁸

Economy: Mixed Signals, Pervasive Corruption

The economy has succeeded in absorbing the initial shocks of the expiration of the Multi Fiber Agreement (MFA), although the long-term effect of this is gradually being felt. Macroeconomic indicators show some positive trends. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2005–06 is projected to exceed 5%. This figure, however, is lower than that of 2004, when it stood at 6.3%. Overall, the economic picture is not very promising because high petroleum, food, and other commodity prices in the global market are putting pressure on Bangladesh’s balance of payments. Remittances from workers abroad grew 14.5% in the 2004–05 financial year but may drop in the near future as manpower export declines—by 19% in the first five months of the year, for example. However, migration of more skilled workers and professionals has offset this decline in terms of total remittances. Price hikes of essential commodities have made the situation worse for the mass of the people. A famine-like situation was experienced in various districts in the north for several weeks during the winter of 2005.

Corruption remains a major obstacle to addressing developmental issues. For the fifth year in a row, Bangladesh topped the nations listed on the Corruption Perception Index prepared by Transparency International.⁹ Although the

7. “Rules of Mustaque, Sayem, Zia Unlawful, Declares HC; Verdict Stayed at Night by Chamber Judge at His Residence,” *ibid.*, August 30, 2005, p. 1.

8. “Attorney General Resigns,” *Bangladesh Observer*, April 29, 2005, p. 1.

9. See <http://www.transparency.org/policy_and_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2005>.

government criticized the report, the finance minister admitted in a parliamentary speech that corruption was pervasive.¹⁰ A minister was sacked for alleged corruption but is yet to face charges. The newly established Anti-Corruption Council remained mired in bureaucratic infighting.

Foreign Relations

Frequent Criticisms

Hosting the twice-postponed thirteenth South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit was a major success in foreign relations. The summit, originally scheduled for January, was first cancelled because of the devastating tsunami in December 2004 and then cancelled again in February 2005 when India refused to join in, citing the security situation in Dhaka and developments in Nepal.

The government came under severe criticism from a number of countries, international bodies, and U.S. lawmakers for the poor human rights situation, rising militancy, and deteriorating law and order.¹¹ Instead of addressing these issues and concerns, the government resorted to tough talk. Khaleda Zia declared that “we won’t care for anybody’s browbeating and dictation.”¹² Finance Minister Saifur Rahman went further, saying that bilateral donors can leave Bangladesh if they cannot adjust to government policies.¹³ These statements came after a meeting in Washington of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Union, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to “discuss their aid strategy against the backdrop of rising Islamist militancy, violation of human rights, sliding law and order, and poor governance,” on February 23–24. The meeting, held without the presence of a Bangladeshi representative, annoyed the government. Although Dhaka banned two militant organizations following the meeting, its relationship with the above bodies remained strained throughout the year. Tension between the donor community and the government came to a head in September when the latter denied a permit to a group of diplomats, known as the Tuesday Group,¹⁴ to hold an international conference in December on “International Best Electoral Practices.”

10. Nurul Kabir, “Country Helpless Against Pervasive Corruption,” *Weekly Holiday* (Dhaka), July 8, 2005, p. 1.

11. For example, the European Parliament adopted a resolution expressing deep concern over the Bangladesh situation on April 14, 2005.

12. “Donors Warned Not to Interfere,” *Daily Star*, March 16, 2005, p. 1.

13. “Donors Can Leave If They Can’t Adjust to Our Policy,” *ibid.*, March 17, 2005, p. 1.

14. The group comprises the ambassadors and high commissioners to Bangladesh from 14 countries, including the U.K., U.S., and Japan. The representative of the EC and the resident coordinator of the U.N. are also members of the group.

On the bilateral front, the Bangladesh-China relationship improved following the previous year's debacle, which had resulted from Bangladesh allowing a Taiwanese company to open a trade office in Dhaka.¹⁵ In April, the two countries signed nine memoranda of understanding on trade and other issues during the visit of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao to Dhaka. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visited China in October. Although the trip was cut short due to the serial blasts in Dhaka, it cemented the bilateral relationship. The prime minister's Japan visit in July, however, achieved very little.

Indo-Bangladesh relations not only remained tense but occasionally flared up in 2005. While outstanding issues such as trade imbalance, water sharing, border demarcation, fencing the border, and allegations by both sides of harboring rebels/militants continued to reappear, new issues have been added to the list. Skirmishes between Bangladeshi and Indian border forces have at times escalated seriously. The proposed Indian river-linking project dominated the media and public discourse. The Bangladeshi government has expressed concerns that India is behind the negative international media coverage of Bangladesh and was upset by the decision of the Indian government not to join the SAARC summit in February. The foreign secretary-level meeting in June in New Delhi, held for the first time in more than two years, helped mend fences. But soon after the countrywide blasts occurred in August, the relationship took a turn for the worse when a cabinet minister and a security chief alleged that Indians were behind the coordinated attacks.¹⁶

Conclusion

The events of the year 2005 show that Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. It can either choose to address the governance crisis and confront the menace of the Islamists for the sake of a brighter future for the nation, or it can continue to drag its feet until it reaches a cul-de-sac.

15. For details, see Ali Riaz, "Bangladesh in 2004: The Politics of Vengeance and the Erosion of Democracy," *Asian Survey* 45:1 (January/February 2005), p. 117.

16. "Indian and Local Criminals Jointly Staged August 17 Blasts: BDR Chief Alleges as Delhi Talks Conclude," *Daily Star*, October 1, 2005, p. 1.