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Conflicting Interests:
Islamic Fundamentalism and Militant Secularism in Bangladesh

By Nicholas Schmidle

MARCH, 2007

THE HEAD OFFICE OF AL-MARKAZUL ISLAMI, a single tower, with frosted, emerald-green windows, rises several stories above the coconut trees and rooftops in Muhammadpur, a neighborhood in central Dhaka. Down below, the streets of Bangladesh's capital city of seven million emit an orchestra of teeming urbanity. Bicycle rickshaws *ding-ding-ding* along, decorated with handlebar tassels, tin wheel covers, and passenger carriages painted with faces of Bengali film stars. Cars, dump trucks, and passenger buses blast horns that play a four- or five-note jingle, while ambulance sirens wail unnoticed. But none of the commotion reaches Mufti Shahidul Islam, the founder and director of Al-Markazul Islami, through the thick, Oz-colored windows of his fifth-story office.

Al-Markazul Islami is an Islamic NGO providing free healthcare and ambulance services. Many Bangladeshis think it is just a cover. They say Shahidul's real business is jihad. In fact, he admits that some of the funds are used to build mosques and *madrassas*, or Islamic seminaries. Yet his nationwide notoriety is balanced by genuine popularity in some places. Besides running Al-Markazul Islami, Shahidul is a former member of parliament. His party, Khelafat Majlish, wants to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic state.

"Mufti Shahidul is a very dangerous man," the owner of my Dhaka guesthouse cautioned one morning as I was heading to meet him. In 1999, he was charged with conspiring in a bomb blast that killed eight Ahmadiyyas. The Ahmadiyyas are a sect of Islam that denies Mohammad to be the final prophet. Islamic fundamentalists consider Ahmadiyyas heretics. When I asked him about the incident, Shahidul denied any involvement, rolling his eyes and letting out a dismissive laugh.

Before I left my home in Islamabad, Pakistan, to travel to Bangladesh, I had visited a radical, yet friendly, cleric there and asked if he knew anyone I could speak with in Dhaka. He scribbled down Shahidul's name on a business card. Clutching the card, I entered the downstairs reception area of Al-Markazul Islami one recent morning, to find barefoot men conversing over cups of tea while cell phones played custom ring tones and land-lines clattered away in the background. I took the elevator to the fifth floor where Shahidul sat behind a large desk, surrounded by assistants and relatives. His aging father-in-law looked on proudly.

"Assalaamu Alaikum (Peace be unto You)," he exclaimed as I opened the door. A 40-something man of medium-height, Shahidul's face is accentuated by a scraggly, henna-died beard, and a puffy, nickel-sized *mehrab*, a bruise that pious Muslims acquire on their forehead from intense and regular prayer. He wore a white *dishdasha* and an expensive wristwatch, with diamonds in place of roman numerals. We exchanged greetings and made small talk in Urdu. Shahidul flashed a wide, comic-book grin the whole time.

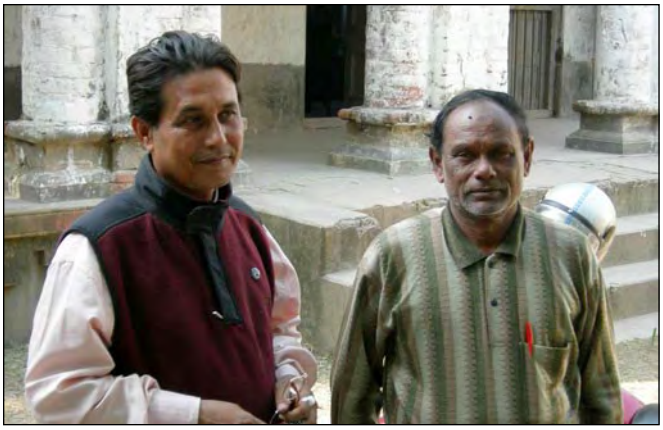
Local newspapers describe Shahidul as a former *mujahideen* who fought against

the Soviet Union during the *jihad* in Afghanistan. Again, he denies the charge. When I asked him if he knew my jihadi friend in Islamabad — who talks openly about fighting in Afghanistan, his links to international jihadi organizations, and his relationship with Osama bin Laden — from Afghanistan, Shahidul shot back, "No, no, no. I never went to Afghanistan." He recited his life story, which included a stint at the infamous Binori Town madrassa in Karachi, and later, a short fundraising trip to Saudi Arabia. No declared stops in Afghanistan. In 1988, he started Al-Markazul Islami. With this busy schedule, how could he ever have the time to wage jihad? "My main business is driving ambulances and carrying dead bodies," he said later during lunch, sitting around a blanket covered with plates of french fries, cheeseburgers and pizza.

Last December, Shahidul sparked a nationwide furor and reinvigorated a long-standing debate in Bangladesh. Four weeks before the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 22 (but later postponed), Khelafat Majlish signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Awami League, one of the nation's two mainstream parties and, traditionally, its most secular one. The agreement stipulated that Shahidul and his party would team up with the Awami League for the elections. If they won, the Awami League guaranteed to enact a blasphemy law, push legislation to brand the Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslims, and officially recognize the *fatwas*, or religious decrees, issued by local clerics. The deal outraged secularists across the country. "Khelafat Majlish is a radical Islamist militant group which is against the spirit of the Liberation War," said "The Anti-Fundamentalism and Anti-Militant Conscious Citizens' Society" in a written statement. "By ascending to power through a deal with a section of fundamentalist militants, the Awami League…will never be able to create a secular Bangladesh."

The Western media had been saying similar things for years. In January 2005, the *New York Times Magazine* published a story about the rise of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh titled "The Next Islamist Revolution?" More recently, *The Washington Post, Newsweek, The Nation* and *The New Republic* published pieces in that same spirit. In January 2007, *The New Republic* suggested that, "Left unchecked, Bangladesh could become another Afghanistan — a base for regional terrorism."

Nonetheless, the prospects for Bangladesh, a country of 170 million people roughly the size of Minnesota, are not nearly as bleak as such reports would suggest. Certainly, Islamist parties have multiplied over the past decade and public support has grown. Yet Bangladeshi society remains overwhelmingly secular. And while the Islamists have grabbed headlines, the secularists and the Islamist parties are actually locked in an intense struggle for predominance. Bangladesh has a long history of civil activism. People are passionate and eager to voice their opinions in the streets. Those same leaders who fought against the imposition of Islamic politics in the Liberation War of 1971, are not about to hand the country over to men like Mufti Shahidul Islam. And he knows it.



Rajib Asmad (left), teacher at a girl's school in Itna.

While voters in Pakistan or Afghanistan might be impressed by a politician's links to the Taliban or his jihadi credentials, in Bangladesh, such affiliations are a political liability. This is why Shahidul hurries to change the subject whenever they are brought up. While he mentioned to me that he didn't believe in secularism, he didn't care to expand. He prefers to discuss other things. Take his constituency of Narail, a city in western Bangladesh, for example. "There is no corruption there," he said, "And it is a big Hindu area." Before the Partition of India in 1947, more than half of Narail's population was Hindu. Shahidul boasted that, because of his work, "Hindu people now say, 'Islam is a nice religion.'"

Three days after our meeting, I went to Itna, a village near Narail, where I met Rajib Asmad, a teacher at a local girls' school. "Mufti Shahidul Islam has helped a lot of poor people — Muslims and Hindus," Asmad said. "He's not only built mosques. He also drilled a lot of tube wells and distributed *a lot* of money. So everyone will vote for him again." (A local journalist later told me that Shahidul has funded at least 40 mosques, 13 madrassas, and 350 tube wells.)

"Do local people support his vision of an Islamic state?"

"Most people don't understand what he really wants," Asmad said. "They think, 'Mufti gave us so much money.' That's why he is getting popular. Not because they agree with his political views."

BANGLADESH IS ONE OF THE FEW post-colonial countries whose demographics almost make sense. Ninety-eight percent of people are ethnically Bengali and speak Bangla, an Indo-Aryan tongue derived from Sanskrit. More than 80 percent of the people follow Islam; the rest are Hindus (15 percent), Christians (less than five percent), or Buddhists. This religious mix has contributed to the vibrancy of Bengali culture. Rabindranath Tagore, a poet and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913,

was a Bengali-speaking Hindu. His verses later became the national anthems for both Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

Tagore composed both poems during the first partition of Bengal, which lasted from 1905 to 1912. In *Amar Shonar Bangla*, Bangladesh's national anthem, he writes: "My Bengal of Gold, I love you / Forever your skies, Your air set my heart in tune, As if it were a flute." After seven years of unrest and a flurry of nationalist poetry, the British capitulated and re-united Bengal. In 1947, it was divided again, this time for good. As the British were leaving the Subcontinent that year, they created two new states, India and Pakistan: West Bengal joined India; East Bengal became the East Wing of Pakistan.

From early on, the founders of Pakistan faced huge challenges trying to reconcile the West Wing (present-day Pakistan) and the East Wing (present-day Bangladesh). More than 1000 miles separated them, with their hostile neighbor, India, sandwiched in between. Bengalis accounted for more than half the population, yet the country was led by those from West Pakistan, a mix of Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Balochis, and Mohajirs. Meanwhile, Urdu, a language spoken by less than five percent of the population, became the national language. Because the written script was derived from Arabic, and Bangla was derived from Sanskrit, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, said Urdu was a more "Muslim" language. "What nonsense," recalled Kamal Hossain, Bangladesh's first law minister, "Identifying language and religion? Bangla was our language. We were Muslims. What was the problem?"

Decades of economic and cultural neglect took their toll on the Bengali masses. Between 1965 and 1970, the West Wing of Pakistan was allotted a budget of 52 billion Rupees (about $865 million), while the East Wing, despite its larger population, received only 21 billion Rupees (about $350 million). Then, in the 1970 parliamentary elections, Bengalis voted almost unanimously in support

of the Awami League. Because of the Bengalis' numerical advantage, the Awami League gained an overall majority in the national assembly, and Sheik Mujibur Rahman, head of the party, should have been named Prime Minister. But the leaders in the West Wing delayed the opening session. On March 25, 1971, Bengali leaders declared their independence and the Bangladesh Liberation War began. The Pakistani Army in a maneuver codenamed Operation Searchlight, sent tens of thousands of soldiers into the streets to crush the Bengali nationalists.

Shahriar Kabir was one of hundreds of thousands of *mukhti bahini*, or freedom fighters, who took up arms. "It was total guerilla warfare," he told me. Today, Kabir is a squat man in his late fifties with a comb-over haircut and a hand-broom mustache. On the night I visited him in his Dhaka home, Nag Champa, a type of incense from India, was burning and the room smelled of sandalwood. Between the incense and the hemp tote bag he held on his lap, Kabir didn't strike me as a freedom fighter.

During the Liberation War, the mukhti bahini faced a serious opponent: volunteer brigades of Bangladeshi Islamists were collaborating with the more than 100,000 Pakistani Army troops stationed in the East Wing. The brigades, known as *razakars,* came from Jamaat-i-Islami, a fundamentalist political party formed by Sayyid Maulana Abdullah Mawdudi in 1941. "They were a killing squad, like the Gestapo in Nazi Germany," Kabir said. The razakars lurked in places where uniformed soldiers could never go. They targeted intellectuals who they considered "the root of all evil for promoting the ideas of Bengali nationalism and identity." In the final days of the war in December 1971, they murdered hundreds of prominent doctors, engineers, journalists and lawyers.

On December 16, 1971, the Pakistani army surrendered at Dhaka's Ramna Racecourse and Bangladesh became an independent state. It emerged from the war as a fiercely secular nation. The 1972 Constitution declared "Nationalism, Socialism, Secularism and Democracy" to be the four pillars of Bangladesh. The constitution also banned religious-based politics.

But Bangladesh lasted only five years as an officially secular state. In November 1975, General Ziaur Rahman, a hero of the Liberation War, seized power after a quick succession of military coups and counter-coups following the assassination of Mujib and his family in August 1975. To solidify his rule, Zia felt it necessary to appeal to the Islamists. In 1977, he removed "Secularism" as one of the Constitution's principles, and lifted the ban on religious-based politics. Despite seeing its popularity plummet in the years immediately after the 1971 war, Jamaat-i-Islami bounced back and has steadily gained power since. Its members occupied 17 out of 300 seats in the last national assembly, including two ministerial portfolios — Social Welfare and Agriculture. "With the Ministry of Agriculture, they have access to grassroots and can reach the farmers. The Ministry of Social Welfare can reach the com-

mon people by providing funds. From here, they recruit and build their power," said a journalist with *The Daily Star* in Dhaka who reports on the Islamists and requested anonymity. According to Shahriar Kabir, Jamaat-i-Islami receives "enormous amounts of money" from the Middle East and "enormous amounts of arms" from Pakistan, part of what he calls their "global jihad network."

Most of Jamaat-i-Islami's top leaders, says Kabir, are former razakars and "enemies of Bangladesh." Fifteen years ago, he formed the Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee, better known as the Nirmul Committee, with two demands: to try former razakars as war criminals, and to readmit the 1972 Constitution's ban on religious-based politics. (The Nirmul Committee is known alternatively as Voice of Secularism.) He feels that the rise of parties like Jamaat-i-Islami and Khelafat Majlish contradicts everything he fought for in 1971. "We wanted a secular democracy," he said. "Three million people were killed during the Liberation War. If we now have to accept Islam as the basis of politics to run the country, then what was wrong with Pakistan?"

A few days later, I made an appointment with Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, Assistant Secretary General of Jamaat-i-Islami, and an accused war criminal. According to a pamphlet published by the Nirmul Committee, Kamaruzzaman was "the principal organizer of the Al-Badr force" — one of the most ruthless razakar brigades. The pamphlet alleges that, in 1971, Kamaruzzaman once dragged a professor, naked, through the streets of Sherpur, a city in central Bangladesh, beating him with leather whips. It also claims that he ordered numerous killings and supervised torture cells. When I asked Kamaruzzaman about the charges one morning in his Dhaka office, he scowled and replied: "Is there any evidence? Not a single piece! I was only a sixteen-year-old college boy. How can I lead such a political force?"

Kamaruzzaman wears nice suits and gold-framed glasses, with a mustache and goatee so finely kempt that they look stenciled. Critics sneer at him for being "all suited and booted," which they say reflects Jamaat-i-Islami's aims to dupe the masses. We snacked on two plates of potato chips, which he ate with his pinky askance.

Despite Jamaat-i-Islami's advances in recent elections, Kamaruzzaman admits that there are numerous barriers to their growth. Its role in the 1971 War, he told me, "can be an obstacle. But we are addressing it. We have accepted reality and are now working for Bangladesh. In 1971, the leaders of Jamaat-i-Islami didn't want to see our Muslim state separated. We wanted the country to be united, but the game is over. The countries are independent. We made a politically wrong calculation," he said. Another obstacle is poverty. Kamaruzzaman added, "People in the villages don't want to hear you talk on and on about religion if you can't provide food to them."

But what about the "Hindu factor?" If Jamaat-i-Islami ever hopes to enact its Islamic revolution, then it will have to undo centuries of cross-pollination between Hindu and Muslim cultures in Bangladesh. The puritan vision of Islam that Jamaat-i-Islami embraces simply has no foundation in Bangladeshi society. I asked Kamaruzzaman who was winning the "culture war" in Bangladesh: the Islamists or those promoting a secular, pluralist vision of Bangladesh? "We are neither winning nor losing at this moment," he said. "But one day people will realize the effects of this so-called openness. Pornography and nudity in these types of Western and Indian films are encouraging violence and terrorist activities. Children shouldn't be distraught by such things. Society cannot be a boundless sky.

"We don't want to impose anything. Of course, there should be a law that, in public places, someone should not be ill-dressed or undressed. But sense should prevail." He paused a moment, before reaching in my direction, palm upturned as if to present his next idea on a silver platter: "You know, self-censorship."

BANGLADESH HAS MORE THAN FIFTY Islamic political parties, militant organizations, and terrorist groups, according to Abul Barkat, an economics professor at Dhaka University who has extensively researched the subject. Barkat, a middle-aged man with a penchant for coining technical terms, contends that each of these groups comprise "operational research projects," ultimately overseen by the most adept of the bunch, Jamaat-i-Islami. "They know they will never capture state power through democracy, so they all work in different ways," he told me. "Harakat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami is not doing the same thing as JMB" — Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh — "and JMB is not doing the same thing as Khelafat Majlish. They are trying different things to find the best way to get power."

Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh may not be the biggest of the Islamist groups, but its activities provide a terrifying example of how even the tiniest outfits can shake — or worse, destabilize — a society. On the morning of August 17, 2005, JMB simultaneously detonated 459 bombs in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts. Near each of the blast sites, they left Bangla- and Arabic-language leaflets claiming responsibility. "It is time to implement Islamic law in Bangladesh," the leaflets read. "There is no future with man-made law."

The gruesome irony of the leaflets was that, just a year earlier, the government and its man-made law had created JMB to defeat a menace from the Left. Bands of Communist rebels known as *Sarbaharas* had been growing stronger near the northwest city of Rajshahi. Meanwhile, just across the border in India, Naxalite rebels were murdering policemen and raiding government offices in several districts. In nearby Nepal, Maoists were threatening to topple King Gyanendra. The government in Dhaka, led by Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party, in con-

junction with Jamaat-i-Islami and Mufti Shahidul Islam's Khelafat Majlish (before he defected to join the Awami League alliance of parties), formulated a strategy to crush the Sarbaharas before the Leftist virus spread any more. They assigned the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, a previously unknown militant outfit, to the task.

The government initially treated JMB with respect. At least eight members of the national assembly bankrolled the group, according to a report in the January 30, 2007, edition of the Bengali daily, *Prothom Alo*. In a phone interview I conducted with a member of JMB one night in Rajshahi, he recalled police officers publicly saluting JMB operations chief Siddiqul Islam, or "Bangla Bhai (Bengali Brother)," while politicians used to address him as "sir." When a reporter from the English-language *The Daily Star* interviewed Bangla Bhai in May 2004, they met in the office of a local government official, while a portrait of Khaleda Zia hung overhead on the wall. At the same time, Bangla Bhai was torturing and terrorizing anyone who he thought was even remotely sympathetic to the Sarbaharas.

Gradually, as the Sarbaharas were defeated, the government withdrew its support and had several JMB members arrested. Bangla Bhai felt betrayed and used. JMB resolved to send the government a message. "We wanted to frighten everyone about our strength," the man said on the phone. The organization trained in camps alongside remote riverbanks and in jungle clearings. Maulana Abdur Rahman, the group's spiritual guide, would stand in front of the blackboard, sketching out tactics and strategy. Wherever Rahman went, both he and Bangla Bhai carried a mid-sized gym bag filled with grenades, clutching field-hockey sticks to use in the event of an ambush. In *The Daily Star* interview, Rahman warned, "We don't believe in the present political trend," a reference to democracy and elections.

The bombing in August 2005, had the obvious effect of stunning the nation. Parents rushed to pull their kids out of school and offices closed early. But for Swapan Bhuiyan, it was a call to action. For years, people like him and Shahriar Kabir had been warning about the threat militant Islamic groups posed to Bangladesh, though few people wanted to listen. The bombings proved that their concerns were credible, but did they have any coherent strategy to respond with?

Bhuiyan, a gentle, middle-aged man with dark skin and a grey beard that seems to be taking over his face and neck, represents a growing class of militant secularists. Many of them are former socialists or communists who have refashioned their ideology to oppose everything that the Islamists stand for. Bhuiyan told me, "I know you shouldn't kill other humans, but these Islamic fundamentalists are like wild dogs. The Islamists have been destroying our values since 1971. They killed our golden sons in the last days before Liberation." I had met Bhuiyan about a year earlier in Karachi at the World Social

"If I had the money, I would train a brigade of people in India and return to kill all the Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh," said Swapan Bhuiyan.

Forum. On one of my first nights in Dhaka, he brought me to the office of his organization, the Revolutionary Unity Front. The electricity was out and a single candle splashed light on a poster of Chairman Mao hanging on one wall. A framed photograph of Comrade Lenin looked out from another.

Twice before, Bhuiyan showed his willingness to fight for a secular Bangladesh. In 1971, he was a freedom fighter. Then, in 1975, while he was serving as a lieutenant in the Bangladeshi Army, news broke about Prime Minster Mujib's assassination. Incensed by the murder of the nation's founding father, Bhuiyan led a mutiny at the Dhaka airport against those who sympathized with Mujib's killers. After a couple days, the mutiny was suppressed. Bhuiyan's seniors sentenced him to die by firing squad. That sentence was commuted to four months of solitary confinement. "No one goes longer than three months," he said with a slight twitch. "Four is unheard of. They tried to make me crazy."

When the lights in the Revolutionary Unity Front's office eventually powered on, I could make out the faces of the other six people in the room. Most of them were in their 30s, born after the 1971 War. "We are all anti-fundamentalists," Bhuiyan said, gesturing around the room. The others nodded. Although their brothers, sisters and cousins weren't killed by razakars, their generation is no less militantly secular. "The secular culture of the common people is strong enough to defeat Islamic fundamentalism here," Manabendra Dev, the twenty-five-year old Dhaka University president of the Bangladesh Students Union, told me later.

I asked Bhuiyan how he viewed the contest of ideologies in modern Bangladesh. "There is only one –ism," he replied. "That's Marxism. When it joins with Bengalism — and it will — there will be a great revolution in Bangladesh." His neck jerked and he ran his hands through his long, silver hair. "But first, if I had the money, I would train a brigade of people in India and return to kill all the

Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh."

BANGLADESH HAS A RICH, TURBULENT legacy of civil, political and cultural activism, starting from 1971, immediately after the war. "There was no government and we had no experience of ruling ourselves," said Abul Barkat, the Dhaka University economics professor. "We organized to reconstruct bridges and rebuild the country. The rise of NGOs" — Barkat estimates there are more than 70,000 Non-Governmental Organizations in the country today, compared to 300 thirty years ago— "stems from local level initiatives. These were people's organizations."

The boom of NGOs is indicative of Bangladeshis' natural ability to act in the name of some greater calling. Perhaps unlike any other place in the world, protests and strikes are seen as legitimate avenues of political discourse. Dhaka University is a battleground between the student arms of the two major parties — the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The campus cafeteria is referred to as "the second parliament" due to the number of student leaders who graduated and became members of the national assembly. "It is a landmark for identity because of its powerful influence in shaping the ethos, the values, and the goals that were pursued by the country's founders," said Kamal Hossain. The Language Movement, which initiated Bangladesh's campaign for independence, began at Dhaka University.

"The history of our country is one of sacrifice and struggle," Manabendra Dev, the student leader, said to me one afternoon in the "second parliament." People's movements have defeated foreign armies, overthrown a military government, and forced concessions from a multinational energy giant. In August 2006, Asia Energy Corporation abandoned a lucrative open-pit coal-mining project in Fulbari, a city in the northwest, after months of demonstrations against Asian Energy's shady dealings and environmentally damaging work. With this kind of track record, people are optimistic that society will be able to repel the forces of fundamentalism.

As part of his efforts, Shahriar Kabir has built eighty private libraries around the country, specifically in places where the Islamist parties are strongest. Each library doubles as a museum for the Liberation War; while Jamaat-i-Islami is trying to put 1971 behind them, Kabir's libraries are keeping the narrative alive. In Chittagong, the second-largest city, there are 13 libraries. At the Double Mooring library there, 105 members — mostly teenage boys — pay an annual fee of five taka, or about 14 cents, for borrowing privileges. The shelves contain some of Kabir's own work (he has written more than 70 fiction and non-fiction books), classics by Tagore, Bengali translations of *Old Man in the Sea* and *Harry Potter*, and a section about the mukhti bahini. Arif Ahmed, a boy in his early teens with a spiky haircut, had just finished reading a Bengali translation of *Hamlet* on the day of my visit. His thoughts on Shakespeare? "Not my favorite. It was too much all about kings."

Later that night, Kamran Hasan Badal, the president of Nirmul's Chittagong chapter of libraries, explained what he hoped to accomplish through the libraries. Badal and I sat on a bench in front of a hip bookstore in downtown Chittagong where poets regularly gather to sip tea and converse. He wore a blue plaid shirt and had a freshly shaven face. "Secular education is often not available outside of the cities. There is only madrassa education," Badal said. "We want to start a debate through the libraries about what *kind* of secularism is best for Bangladesh." While children are allowed to check out books for older siblings and parents, the Nirmul libraries are oriented towards the minds of the next generation — and how they consider the meaning of secularism. Badal added that a top priority of a secular state should be to protect the rights of religious minorities. "When the Hindus and the Ahmadiyyas have been attacked by Islamists in the past, the government doesn't do anything. It has to ensure the safety of minorities."

The longer we spoke, the more I sensed Badal's animosity towards anyone who wore a headscarf or beard. I asked how he differentiated between symbols of religious revivalism and so-called "Talibanization." There seemed little room for compromise in his mind. "We are against anyone who capitalizes on religion for political gains," he said.

After our conversation, I left the quiet alley where the bookstore was located and stepped into the frenetic streets

Students from the Dar Uloom Moinul near Chittagong.

of Chittagong. A slight chill made the February night air feel refreshing. I thought about Badal's ideas and compared them to things I had heard from Swapan Bhuiyan, Abul Barkat and Shahriar Kabir. Besides being staunch secularists, all four men's worldviews were rooted in intellectual traditions springing from the Left. They romanticized the downtrodden. But in trying to protect the rights of tens of thousands of downtrodden Hindus from the aggressive Islamists, were they neglecting the plight of tens of millions of downtrodden Muslims?

ON THE NIGHT OF JANUARY 11, 2007, AFTER three months of violent protests, President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a State of Emergency. The move dashed the hopes of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-i-Islami, whose alliance was heading for a landslide victory in the January 22 elections; in early January, the Awami League-led opposition bloc had announced its intention to boycott the polls. But the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-i-Islami's euphoria was short-lived; the decision to boycott convinced the international community that January elections could be neither free nor fair. By the time I arrived in Dhaka on the morning of January 13, the army had postponed the election.

In the following weeks, army and police units launched an aggressive anti-corruption drive. Scheduling an interview in Dhaka became difficult. Many politicians turned off their mobile phones and slept at a different place each night. Dozens of high-ranking politicians from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, including former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's son, Tarique Rehman, were arrested. But Jamaat-i-Islami remained unsullied by corruption charges. In fact, they emerged sounding like model democrats. "The constitution has been violated," Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, the Jamaat-i-Islami leader, said to me during our meeting in late January. "The election should have been held. Whether a party decides to participate or not, this shouldn't be a consideration."

Mustafizur Rahman, the Research Director at the Center for Policy Dialogue, a think tank in Dhaka, admitted that, "Jamaat-i-Islami has handled things very tactfully. They just aren't into the business of extortion like the other two parties," he added, referring to the BNP and Awami League. A top army general, who asked not to be identified, said, "Every devil has its pluses and minuses. And least Jamaat is relatively honest." Their party workers, the general added, are the only people in the country who show up for anything on time, "pencils sharpened and ready to take notes."

Even Harry K. Thomas, the former U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, described Jamaat-i-Islami on several occasions as a "moderate" and "democratic" party. It is the only large party in Bangladesh whose internal affairs and promotions are based on merit and elections. (The mainstream parties depend on personality cults and family connections.) Most of its members are university educated, English-speaking, and know how to speak to Western journalists. "Our idea is to bring change through a constitutional and democratic process," Kamaruzzaman said.

Jamaat-i-Islami's commitment to elections puts voters in an awkward situation. What constitutes democracy? Is it elections? Or liberalism? Should voters back a liberal, one-woman party like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party or Awami League? Or the democratic, but illiberal Jamaat-i-Islami? Who is a liberal, democratic Bangladeshi to support?

In light of the mainstream parties' autocratic ways and backroom deals with Islamist parties, Abul Barkat is relying on civil society groups to build and sustain a convincing model of secularism. Though the Islamists are strong, he sounds confident that they aren't going to win. "Jamaat-i-Islami can only succeed if we, as civil society, fail," he said. He rehashed his days as a freedom fighter and nodded slowly, as if impressed by his own strength of character. "The burden is on us."

AFTER OUR INITIAL MEETING at Al-Markazul Islami, Mufti Shahidul Islam and I stayed in frequent contact. I think he liked having an American friend, a prop to shield him against damning allegations of being pro-Taliban. But on the first Friday in February, he didn't show up for a planned meeting at Al-Markazul Islami. When I inquired into his whereabouts from a tea-sipping colleague, he answered that Shahidul was in bed. "High blood pressure," he added. Four days later, Mufti Shahidul Islam was arrested for having links to militant Islamist organizations.

The following morning, I visited Kamal Hossain, the former law minister and author of the 1972 constitution. Hossain is a man of medium height with a deep voice and modest bulges of fat around his cheeks, knuckles, and thighs. He heads a political party known as the Gano, or People's, Forum. I met him at his house. We sat in a room with towering ceilings, Turkmen carpets and shin-height, glass coffee tables.

"I see that the army arrested a political ally of yours yesterday."

"Mine? No, no, no," Hossain said. His party belonged to Awami League-led electoral alliance that Khelafat Majlish later joined. He glared at me. "I feel insulted and offended and outraged that I should be called an ally of this man. The signing of the deal with Khelafat Majlish was about rank opportunism and totally unprincipled politics," he said. Spittle collected on his lips. "Some of us are still guided by principle," he exclaimed.

Hossain describes himself as faithful Muslim, but he is also a militant secularist. He admires the way that the U.S. Constitution framed secularism. The rise of groups like Khelafat Majlish and Jamaat-i-Islami, he believes, a

Bicycle rickshaws idling in front of the Dhaka University campus

total anathema to that style of secularism. "I go into the Jamaat areas and tell them, 'You have completely misinterpreted Islam. The Prophet didn't summon you as guides. We had Islam in Bengal for 700 years and we didn't need you then. You did the wrong thing in 1971 — and it would be just as well if you stayed out,'" he said. From 1998 to 2003, Hossain had similar conversations with the Taliban government of Mullah Omar, while he was serving as U.N. Special Rapporteur to Afghanistan. "'Who keeps telling you this nonsense that women can't work?' I'd ask them. 'The Prophet's wife was a business lady and you don't even let them go to school.'"

As author of the 1972 constitution, Hossain played as pivotal a role as anyone in deciding the nature of secularism in Bangladesh. I asked him if he ever imagined he would see the day when the Awami League would be signing agreements with Islamist parties. "Absolutely not," he said. In fact, he often asks himself, "What have we done to deserve this?"

Hossain struggles to determine a proper course of action. Immediately after the Awami League signed the Memorandum of Understanding with Khelafat Majlish, many secular-minded people experienced near paralysis. Hossain cautions that, especially now, society should be vigilant not to be "psychologically blackmailed" into inaction.

But inaction is only one possibility. Overreaction is another.

One evening, near his hometown of Dinajpur, Swapan Bhuiyan and I were sitting on a flat-bed trolley being pulled by a bicycle when we passed a single-room madrassa standing in the middle of a rice patty. Banana and coconut trees leaned over the ramshackle structure. "They are training terrorists there," Bhuiyan said.

The madrassa sign was written in Bangla and Urdu, and I could see that the seminary was for females memorizing the Quran; in other words, teenage girls. "Swapan, it's a girl's madrassa," I chuckled. "Not all madrassas and mosques are training terrorists."

He jerked his head side to side. Then he shared a short Bengali proverb with me. In it, a cow gets burned by fire. The rest of its life, the cow cannot even look at the sun setting in the western sky.

Bhuiyan paused. "We are thinking like that," he said. "When we hear about a new madrassa we get frightened." ❑

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