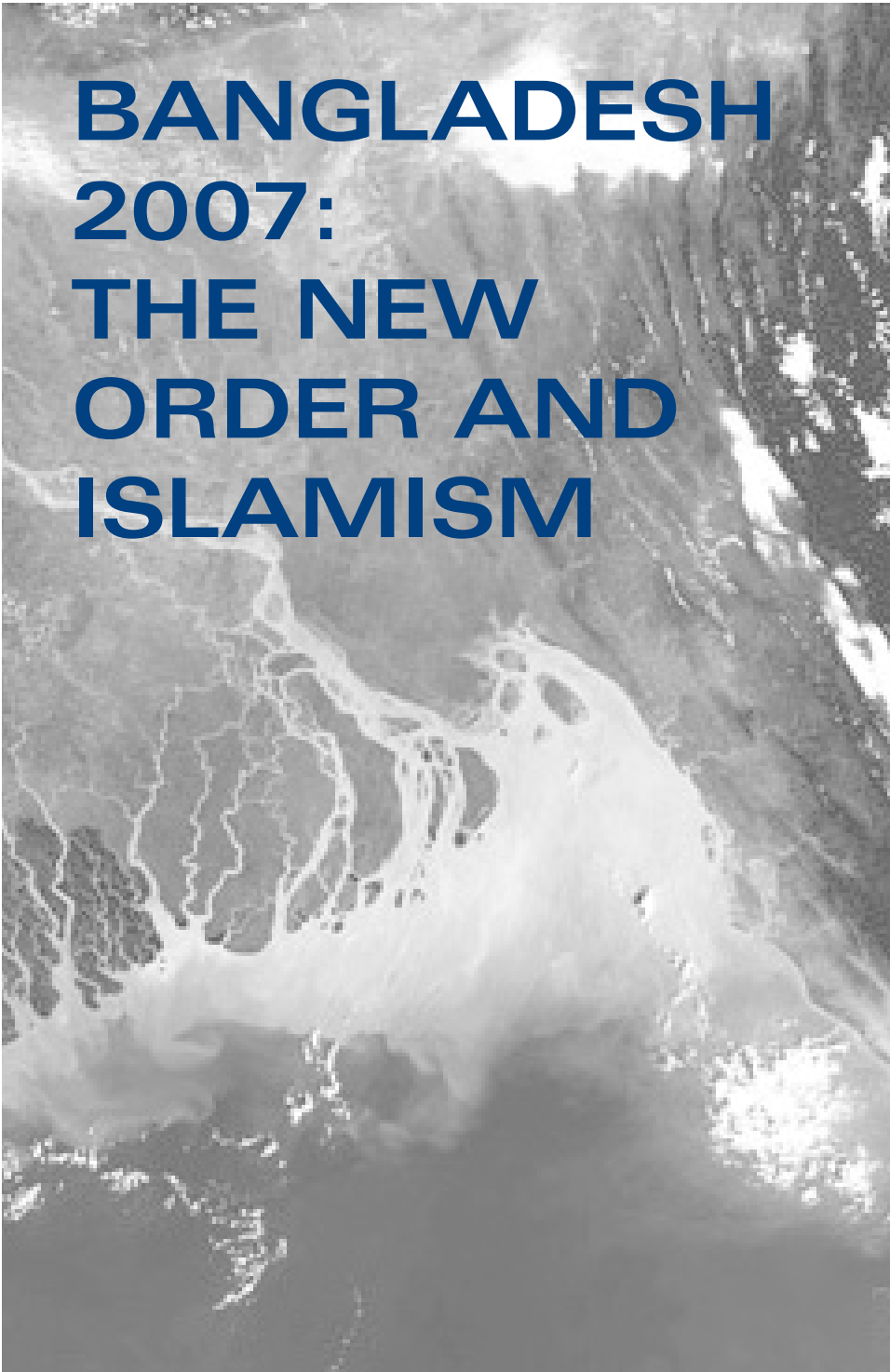


WHITE
PAPER

Spring 2007

HUDSON
INSTITUTE

An aerial photograph of a river delta, likely the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta in Bangladesh. The water is a mix of brown and white, with a large, prominent white structure, possibly a dam or a large bridge, extending into the water. The surrounding land is a mix of green and brown, indicating agricultural and natural terrain.

**BANGLADESH
2007:
THE NEW
ORDER AND
ISLAMISM**

**BY
MANEEZA
HOSSAIN**

BANGLADESH 2007: The New Order and Islamism

BY MANEEZA HOSSAIN

INTRODUCTION

In the global conflict against terrorism, radical Islamism is the driving ideology of militant forces that have disrupted peace, security, and stability in the world. Islamism, as a spectrum of political formulations that share the proposition that Islam as a religion is relevant to the political process, includes many forms that blatantly reject democracy. Some of these forms condone—if not promote—violence. A distinction is made by many Muslim thinkers, and others, between Islamism, as a political ideology, and Islam, the religious and faith framework for one fifth of the world population. In particular, a distinct goal has been to underline that Islam is not incompatible with democracy. Towards that end, the democratic experiences of Muslim-majority societies are viewed with interest.

Bangladesh, a Muslim majority South Asian nation, has often been presented as a success story. Since 1991, for three consecutive terms, democratic governments have won mandates in contested, competitive, and often raucous elections. It was in the interest of Bangladesh, as well as the world, to see this decade and a half long tradition continue. It was also recognized that Bangladeshi democracy was riddled with problems, especially corruption. The approach

to the scheduled elections of January 22, 2007, was therefore characterized by serious concerns. The likelihood of violent clashes seemed high. This researcher, herself a native of Bangladesh, was one of a handful of commentators who warned of the dangers to Bangladesh's democracy from the mismanagement of its democratic process. Unfortunately, the dangers presented by the situation that has unfolded since January 2007 have only amplified the risks for Bangladesh, the global conflict against terrorism, and world stability.

Barely noticed by the United States and Europe, democracy in Bangladesh has been suspended as a result of a bloodless takeover by the military on January 11, 2007, eleven days before parliamentary elections were to have been held. The action undertaken by the military presents considerable opportunities for Islamists. This paper surveys the potential risks associated with this suspension of democracy and describes affinities and circumstances that give the Islamists potential advantages in the next phase of Bangladesh's political evolution.

An interim semi-constitutional government has been in control since then. Its public façade is a civilian Council of Advisers, an incarnation with a new expanded role for the constitutionally mandated pre-election Caretaker Government. It seeks to camouflage

the fact that the military is the real decision-making authority, the power behind the scenes.

I have referred to this interim government as Bangladesh's New Order. Although similar governments have appeared elsewhere, for Bangladesh it is a new model. I describe it as "semi-constitutional" because it stretches the notion of a caretaker cabinet into a time-frame for which the Constitution is silent. The New Order can argue that it is not in breach of the Constitution. It can equally be argued that it is extra-constitutional because it is in territory uncovered by the Constitution. Bangladesh will have to answer a fundamental "social contract" issue. When the Constitution grants specific powers to the government, and is silent on others, does it mean that the government is limited to those specific powers, or not? Bangladesh is overwhelmingly Muslim and is home to the third largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia and Pakistan. Disenchantment with the political process has created an opportunity for Islamism. In its most radical forms, Islamism rejects democracy and advocates violence as a means to establish the Islamist conception of state. Bangladesh has a long history of moderate Islamist formulations, i.e. ones that accept, or purport to accept, the democratic process, if only as a means to an end—that of establishing a Shariah state. However, the recent global surge in militant Islamism has affected Bangladesh, which has experienced the emergence of smaller groups of a far more virulent character. The suspension, if not demise, of democracy in Bangladesh since January 11, 2007 opens the way for Islamists to assert themselves. The consequences of such an assertion could be dramatic and not happy for those, everywhere, who champion democracy.

As I shall explain in this paper, it behooves other democratic governments, especially the United States, to shake off their usual indifference to Bangladesh and to use their good offices to help the democratic forces within Bangladesh prevail.

Policy and opinion-makers in the West, and in particular in the United States, ought to follow carefully

the unfolding of events in Bangladesh. Radical Islamists are surely paying attention. The slide towards the abyss that Bangladesh seems to be experiencing is not irreversible. Democracy has a chance.

A NEW ORDER

Ahead of the election, the Bangladesh National Party-led government of Begum Khaleda Zia had created an infrastructure of "electoral fraud": the electoral lists were doctored, local wards were set for a rigged performance, and the outcome of the national elections was to be a forgone conclusion. On the other hand, the Opposition, led by the Awami League, convinced that it had exhausted all peaceful means, had declared an all-out escalation, including "hartals"—politically motivated general strikes—and a siege of the capital city, Dhaka. Amidst calls from Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the opposition, for people to mobilize "with all that they had," and blunt assertions from close associates of hers that the elections would be stopped "even at the price of a civil war," the country seemed destined for violence, if not prolonged chaos.

Events on January 11, 2007 changed the course of the country and saved it from civil war: The Bangladeshi military, an institution professionalized and depoliticized over a decade and a half, stepped out of the Cantonment and into the political arena and effectively dictated the agenda to politicians and bureaucrats. Younger officers are reported to have pressured their superiors for action. The army leadership held a meeting with President Iajuddin Ahmed in the course of which their vision for the way forward was spelled out, and the President was asked to follow course.

After the President declared a state of emergency on January 11, he opted not to be a member of the Council of Advisers. The new head of government in its civilian façade is Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former

governor of the Bangladesh central bank and former World Bank employee.

Fakruddin Ahmed and most of his fellow Advisors are renown in Bangladesh for their professionalism and patriotism. Their willing participation in this experiment in government can be attributed to their sense of duty as capable administrators and technocrats. Similarly, the action of military officers in interdicting an imminent confrontation, and possibly a civil war, has to be viewed as their response to a national emergency. The Bangladesh Army too, has a deeply rooted sense of its national responsibility going back to its origins as the corps of freedom fighters that liberated the homeland from West Pakistani occupation.

In the context of the New Order, both the military and the technocrats have adopted paternalistic behavior towards the nation, in terms that are more in line with the Islamist view than with democratic tradition.

Born out of the Independence struggle—in which Islamists openly sided with the repressive West Pakistani forces—the Bangladeshi military could not have been expected to be well disposed towards Islamism. However, in the course of the subsequent two decades, a number of factors both internal and external helped to dilute what could have been an enduring animosity between the military and the Islamists.

While the Indian armed forces were partners with the emerging Bangladeshi military in the fight for the creation of the new nation, new geopolitical realities put down roots immediately after the emergence of Bangladesh. Virtually surrounded by India, a neighbor whom it regards as the regional superpower, Bangladesh has struggled to check Indian hegemony and to insure a degree of genuinely indigenous decision-making. In the military realm, there emerged a portrayal of “the Indian” as the “other,” or the external threat. For example, training targets for Bangladeshi soldiers were presented as turbaned human figures that unmistakably resembled Indian special forces.

Both Islam and Bengali nationalism were part of the mix of cultural ingredients that led to the formulation of Bangladesh as a national idea. A delicate shift

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in the Bangladeshi national narrative accompanied the repositioning of India from friend, its status when the country was still the eastern wing of Pakistan, to foe. The exploitation of East Pakistan by the Islamabad-led western wing had diminished the Muslim aspect of the East's identity, and thus enhanced the Bengali facet. With Independence, the memory of exploitation gave impetus to a continuing diminution of Islamic identity. However, over time, new tensions and concerns gradually eroded this memory. Islam, in its most generic sense—not as the politicized ideology promoted by Islamism—regained its status as the central element in the life of Bangladeshis.

A disconnect emerged between two visions. The first is a vision of Bangladesh as adopted by its intellectual class and, its increasingly cosmopolitan business and political strata, a vision based on notions of Bengali nationalism and/or Bangladeshi patriotism. The second vision is less coherent. It is about a parochial existence, often limited by poverty and neglect, and focused on survival and family, with a traditional “soft” Islam providing the framework. The interplay between these two visions was largely through the patronage system of the two major political parties.

THE POLITICAL PARTIES

Since 1975, the two main political parties have been the Bangladesh National Party and the Awami League. They have moved away from their ideological roots and through osmosis and emulation have acquired similar structures. Both were elite based parties with patronage networks that run deep into the population at large. Both parties evolved their rhetoric and discourse from their respective socialist and nationalist pasts. Rhetorically, each embraced human rights, democracy, and sound governance, the better to be accepted in the community of nations. Much of this change in discourse remained superficial; it affected party structures and behavior only in mar-

ginal ways. It catered more to the socio-economic and political elites' self-image as well as to the demands of the international community.

However, one can notice a subtle assimilation within the political parties of many of the cultural values of the public at large. Thus, some Islamic symbolism is accommodated. It should be underlined that this accommodation was not as a result of *Islamist pressure*, but more a recognition of the re-centered role of Islam in Bangladeshi life.

Islamists, along with the two main political parties, have capitalized on this soft reassertion of Islam in Bangladeshi identity. However, Islamists attempted to go beyond this re-centering, towards the creation of their Islamist utopia. The two phenomena—the restoration of “soft” Islam into Bangladeshi life after Independence, and Islamist militancy—have to be viewed as parallel but independent events.

THE MILITARY

The troops as well as the senior leadership of the Bangladeshi military—most of the latter participated in the War of Independence as nationalist freedom fighters—remain committed to the ethos of the formative years, one that idealizes Bangladesh as a heroic nation emerging from a bloody history. In all likelihood, it is this ethos that motivated many of the senior officers who engaged in the January 11 action to “save the nation” from corrupt politicians. The threat of an Islamist emergence in Bangladesh was often rejected by the colonels and generals as being in contradiction to the essence of Bangladesh, an essence perpetually portrayed in the context of the War of Liberation.

The Bangladeshi armed forces reflect the socio-economic and cultural make-up of the nation. Anecdotal evidence and accounts from within the army point to the emergence of Islam, even Islamism, at the expense of Bangladeshi liberation-style heroism, within the rank-and-file of the army. It has often been reported

that younger officers tend to be more religious, and that some have even shown explicit support for Islamist ideas.

It is unsurprising that this should have occurred. With the corrosion of politics in Bangladesh, as a result of the unchecked abuse of its democratic institutions, Islamism as an ideal became attractive even among those who reject its attempt at regulating social life.

There is another affinity between Islamism and the military. Islamism propounds a framework for the regimentation of society, i.e. it has an authoritarian strain. The military, where discipline and order are paramount, is inherently authoritarian. Experience in other countries has shown that these two approaches to ordering society may not work towards a common goal. In Turkey, the military has posited itself as the ultimate guarantor of secularism against any Islamist incursion. It is noteworthy that in Turkey the military antedates both state and Islamist institutions. Algeria is another example of a military that has staunchly resisted compromise with Islamists. However, the military's exclusion of the Islamists was a major factor in plunging the country into a devastating civil war in the 1990s, from which Algeria has never recovered.

Or, consider Pakistan and Indonesia, which as Asian countries may be more relevant to Bangladesh. In Pakistan, a gradual increase in the entanglement between the military and Islamists was supposed to offset the political and factional divisions of the nation. Instead, it was and is a major contributor to the weakening of the notion of Pakistan and to its potential collapse—even now—as a conventional nation-state. In Indonesia, the reliance on Islamism was supposed to counter the leftist tendencies of the 1960s, which were ended by the emergence of Suharto, an anti-communist strongman. The association of the tamed Islamist formations with Suharto's autocratic state might have kept militant Islamism in check. However, with the restoration of democracy in 1998 after the forced retirement of Suharto, Islamist groups became resurgent and now vie openly with more moderate parties for political and social influence.

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In post-January 11 developments in Bangladesh, the New Order seems to be espousing the approach of the two main political parties with professed commitment to human rights, democracy and non-corrupt governance. But this is mostly lip service. Sound governance is emerging as the paramount value. Human rights and democracy are now relegated to a “foreseen” future to follow elections by the end of 2008. In the meantime, a revival of the notion of a Heroic Bangladesh, as an echo of the War of Independence, is making its way back into official discourse. Absent from this new mix is a recognition of the new status of Islam in Bangladeshi life, both in its conventional “soft” form, and in its “hard” rendition along new Islamist lines.

Sound governance, at the expense of democracy and human rights, and as a vehicle for development, is explicitly avowed by mainstream Islamists. Indeed, one major reason for the appeal that Islamists have had at the grassroots level is their ability to deliver social services untainted by corruption. The driving motivation for this insistence on sound governance differs between the Islamists and the New Order. For the latter, sound governance is a stepping-stone towards equitable development and theoretically real democracy. For the Islamists, the insistence is of a moral character, and is reflective of a socio-cultural order to which Islamism aims, namely that of a religiously sound and Shariah-regulated society.

Despite the difference in motivation, the similarity in approach has protected Islamists from the New Order’s wholesale arrests of persons the military regards as politically suspect. From January 11 to mid-May, the authorities took into detention 193,000 persons, according to Odhikar, a human-rights organization. Odhikar also reported that 96 persons “were killed” or died while in custody. To make room for these political prisoners in the jails, the New Order released numbers of common criminals. There is no prospect of early trials for the detainees, not least because the New Order has effectively shut down the courts.

It may be argued that this common direction would work against the spread of Islamism, as the New

Order succeeds in cleaning up corruption, thus denying Islamists one main aspect of their appeal. However, the difference between the two formulations of sound governance, “rational towards development” for the New Order, and “moral towards social cohesion” for the Islamists, works in favor of the Islamists.

Success in implementing such measures can be portrayed by the Islamists as a vindication of their approach. Alternatively, even if such measures are not successfully implemented, Islamists can argue that there is indeed a national consensus on the validity of their aims. The anti-rich populism that much of the media has engaged in, prompted by the desire of the New Order to keep the issue of corruption in the limelight, is compatible with the ideological reasoning of Islamists, who consider ostentatious displays of wealth to be immoral and repugnant.

Even while engaging in massive “corruption” the Islamists had succeeded in exploiting a distinction between two types of corruption among public officials that is widely understood by Bangladeshi society: (1) corruption for one’s personal benefit and (2) corruption for the community’s benefit. A public official who steals official funds intended for public projects and diverts them to the acquisition of goods and services for his own benefit is viewed differently from a public official who misappropriates funds to expand the availability of goods and services for his own constituency. Much of the corruption by officials of Bangladesh National Party and the Awami League fell within the first category, personal enrichment, while a sizeable fraction of the corruption the Islamists engaged in was of the second category, community benefit. The New Order’s “sound government” focus was limited to only the first type of corruption.

The New Order has repeatedly issued a ban on politics, including “indoor politics.” Private meetings in which political issues are discussed are considered illegal. The New Order has also openly, if not explicitly, adapted a “minus two” approach by hinting at its determination to sideline Awami League president Sheikh Hasina and BNP chairman Khaleda Zia as

political players. Press reports and persons close to the New Order have indicated that the military favors the creation of a new political party to replace the two major parties. However, the chances for such a scheme to succeed remain minimal, even if in the short-term the marginalization of the “two ladies” seems to be working. The political class in Bangladesh, stunned by the military’s January 11 move, did appear to comply with the New Order’s edicts. However, this compliance was the result of the atmosphere of fear that the New Order instilled. It was not a newly acquired sense of political quietism. Still, the suspension of political activity and the widespread detentions within the political class have created an imbalance of public attitudes in favor of Islamists.

The New Order’s ban on political activity and speech and its large-scale round-ups of political activists created important advantages for Islamists. No longer can the two parties “hire” thousands of demonstrators for “street theater” manifestations during “hartals,” the politically motivated general strikes. Indeed, the loss of that income to the extent it causes hardship may lead to grassroots discontent with the New Order. That may help Islamists in their quest for political power.

THE ISLAMISTS

The main Islamist political organization, Jamaate Islam, was keenly aware of the advantage that it was gaining with the emergence of the New Order. Islamists have taken the view, so far not disputed by the New Order, that the banning of political activity does not prohibit “dawa.” Narrowly defined, “dawa” means missionary activity aimed at exhorting Muslims to a better adherence to the precepts of their religion. But Islam makes no distinction between Islam as a religion and Islam as state. Thus, “dawa” can also be Islamist political activity with plausible deniability. “Dawa,” with the mosque as a platform and as a

place of reunion, can never be stopped by any government that professes to be Islamic. And so the silencing of secular political debate and activity has catapulted Islamism to the status of the primary political movement in the Middle East.

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, Islamists profess to respect democracy as theory and democratic practice, even as they maneuver to install a theocratic state that may be anything but politically pluralistic. In Dhaka, the engineers of the New Order said they acted in pursuit of a “higher purpose,” a crusade against corruption. Such rhetoric plays well with the Bangladeshi grassroots.

The assimilation of Islamism into the democratic process in Bangladesh and elsewhere has been through an approach that argued that Islamists are welcome to participate in the process as long as they accept the principle of democracy as paramount. It has been argued that the Islamists’ acceptance thus far granted to democracy has been tactical, i.e. that Islamists will adhere to the rules of democracy in practice while advocating that there is a higher value, the establishment of a Shariah state, a state that operates within a framework of Islamic law, the law of the Quran. By demonstrating that democracy can indeed be subordinated to another purpose, the New Order has set a precedent that Islamists may claim to emulate in the future, at the expense of democracy.

It is further damaging to the notions of democracy and human rights to have prominent figures in the New Order state that even “fundamental rights do not exist in a state of emergency,” hence relegating putative universal rights to the status of privileges. Islamists have argued that so-called “universal” rights are not inalienable as they are derived from human innovation. Such denial of fundamental rights by the New Order is consistent with the Islamist position.

In addition, the basic notion of democracy as reflective of the sovereignty of the people over state institutions has been assaulted. By underlining the need for a local brand of democracy, and by positioning the army and an unelected cabinet of technocrats as the shapers

of this local democracy, the New Order is engaging in blatant paternalism. This top-down approach to politics is aligned with Islamist thought, which accepts it albeit with a different ultimate source of authority. While the Bangladeshi practice of democracy over the past decade and a half has been flawed, it did reflect a national ethos of the supremacy of the popular will through the ballot box. Even the worst transgressors of the system did not adopt a discourse that denies this ubiquitously accepted ethos.

Only Islamists shyly advocated that divine order is the only perfect order; still, they did so without openly rejecting democracy. Their compromise hovered around the notion that Muslim society will voluntarily choose the establishment of a Shariah state, thereby preserving the supremacy of Shariah while not dethroning democracy as a process. This nuanced, even utopian, compromise is no longer needed. Democracy as a process is no longer sacrosanct.

Bangladeshi Islamists, as well as most in the international community, in the immediate aftermath of the January 11 coup, seem to have adopted a wait-and-see approach. While the situation offers many convenient elements in their favor, as noted above, it did bring with it one element that constitutes a threat to their position. However, this element is of an ephemeral nature.

In the Liberation War of 1971, Islamists in what became Bangladesh, sided with the colonizer, Pakistan, under a banner of Islamic solidarity. This major miscalculation ignored the particularities of the Bengali population of the Eastern Wing. It also condoned a regime of exploitation, oppression and ultimately murder and rape that the Islamabad government had imposed on the Eastern Wing. That was a heavy, negative legacy for Bangladeshi Islamists to surmount. Well into the 1980s and 1990s, the stigma of having been traitors to the motherland was regularly affixed to the Islamists of Bangladesh, both leaders and followers.

By the turn of the century, with the memory of the Independence era fading, and with democracy losing credibility through the systemic abuses committed by

the two main political formations, the Islamists succeeded in distancing themselves from their “shameful” past. Islamists even held public celebrations of Independence Day.

There seems to be little appreciation, among both the military brass and the technocrats of the New Order, of the success of the Islamists in disassociating their current activities from their loyalty to Islamabad during the War of Independence. In its campaign to establish itself as the voice of the nation, the New Order revived the rhetoric of the independence era. The socialist content of the Independence movement, born out of the massive disparity between local Bengalis and the West Pakistanis, was redirected as anti-rich populism aimed at the entrepreneurial class. Similarly, the anti-Islamist component of Bengali nationalism, itself a result of Islamist disregard for Bengali suffering in the Pakistan era, was revived as a promise of a War Crimes Tribunal against collaborators, that is the Islamist leadership.

For all but a few older and more politically engaged intellectuals and politicians, this anachronistic targeting of 2007 figures with 1971 charges, had little effect. Still, while this attempt at acting against the Islamist leadership demonstrates a lack of collusion between military and Islamists, it cannot be interpreted as reflective of an innate animosity. Instead, it is illustrative of a generation gap between some of the army leadership and much younger, large elements of the Bangladeshi population. It also reflects a gap between the army leadership and many young officers, who view Islamists as service providers and social ideologues, not counter-revolutionaries.

A temptation both in some Bangladeshi circles and abroad is to conceive of the military as the counterweight to the organized forces of Islamism. Notions of “Pakistanization” of Bangladeshi politics, i.e. of interplay between “mosque” and military, in which the military keeps the “mosque” in check, have been presented. Rather than an element of control over Islamism, the military adventure into Bangladeshi politics is likely to constitute an empowering factor for Islamism,

both within the military and in society at large.

The one real counterweight to Islamism in Bangladesh might be a citizen-centered democratic process. Bangladeshi democracy since 1991 has lacked a “citizen-centered” quality. By suppressing grassroots political activity, the New Order paves the way for Islamist advances.

CONCLUSION

In considering this critical episode of Bangladeshi history, it is important to recognize that the current situation is likely to push Bangladesh towards more radicalization. Only a restoration of the democratic process can reverse this tendency. Reform and the injection of a “citizen-centered” democracy can happen only from within. The notion of paternalistic reform from above undertaken by a benign New Order is fallacious both in theory and in practice: the New Order does not have an effective formula for reform, nor is it capable of implementing one. By dismantling the democratic process, with the promise of rebuilding it “better” in the future, the New Order is merely legitimizing the Islamist agenda.

The responsibility of rescuing Bangladesh from an enduring erosion of its political culture, and saving the army from further entanglement in a political process that is bound to lead it towards corruption, falls on the Bangladeshi political class. It may indeed be expecting too much to ask the politicians who have wreaked havoc on Bangladesh’s democracy and who are viewed by many as selfish and immature, to transcend their old selves and to become national saviors. It should nonetheless be underlined that the disparagement of politicians has been a healthy sign of Bangladeshi political life. With all their shortcomings, Bangladeshi politicians, albeit imperfectly, have given the nation vehicles to express its needs and wants.

The military having saved the nation, it is incumbent on the nation now to save the military. A nation-

al salvation front is needed, a grand coalition that brings together the major political parties and that acts as a watchdog over the civilian component of the New Order, the Caretaker Government, to assure that it fulfills its mission. That mission is to hold free and fair elections and to abide by the results. The sanctity and irrevocable supremacy of the democratic process has to be re-enshrined in order to avoid “Pakistanization,” or any other application of failed models onto Bangladesh. The involvement of the military in political and economic dossiers, from anti-corruption to legal reform, must be reversed.

The interest of Bangladesh, of the South Asian region, and of world stability is in the prompt restoration of a democratically elected government, directly accountable to Bangladeshi society, not to some higher notion of “principle and value.” It is incumbent on all friends of Bangladesh, and in particular the United States, to request a firm timetable for such a restoration of democracy. The damage done by the New Order, the responsibility of which is evidently shared with the main Bangladeshi political parties for their blatant abuse of the system, cannot be undone. Further damage can be stopped if Bangladeshi society is reassured that a path to the restoration of its custodianship of itself is fixed. No higher value can, or should be advocated by Bangladesh’s international partners, in particular the United Nations, the World Bank and the United States.

Neither dreams of the Turkish model, in which the army is guarantor and custodian of the political process, nor fears of the Pakistani model, in which the army is entangled in both politics and religion, need apply to Bangladesh. Despite its severe problems of corrupt governance, Bangladesh over the three and a half decades since Independence has been on a progressive trajectory towards genuine democratic participation. Good intentions notwithstanding, no paternalism whether militaristic or Islamist, is capable of curing the ailments of this young nation. Only an incremental democratic process has this potential. Restoring it now is the only priority. ■

HUDSON INSTITUTE

1015 15th Street, NW, Sixth Floor
Washington DC 20005
Tel: 202-974-2400 Fax: 202-974-2410

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BY MANEEZA HOSSAIN

Maneeza Hossain, a specialist on the politics and culture of Bangladesh, is a Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute. Ms. Hossain, a U.S.-trained lawyer and native of Dhaka who has written several monographs on Islamism in Bangladesh, is currently producing a study of the political evolution of Bangladesh.