

# The Life and Times of Bangla Bhai

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## Acronyms

AL	Awami League, a major political party
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party, another major political party
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HC	High Court
HUJI-B	Harakat ul-Jihad-I-Islami/Bangladesh, an outlawed Islamist group
ICS	Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami
JMB	Jamaat-al-Mujahedin Bangladesh
JMJB	Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh, vigilante sub-group of JMB
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PBCP	Purba Banglar Communist Party, an outlawed Marxist group
RAB	Rapid Action Battalion, an elite national police force
RIHS	Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, a Kuwait NGO
UNO	Upazila Nirbahi Officer, the senior sub-district authority
US	United States of America

# The Life and Times of Bangla Bhai



## Introduction

Bangladesh is a secular democracy with a mainly Muslim population, in a short list of similar states that includes Turkey, Morocco and Indonesia. Minority Islamist political parties have formed in these countries with missions to establish Sharia government. With similar objectives, more aggressive groups have strayed outside of the democratic process with aims to overthrow their governments, resorting to terrorism in their attempts to destabilize the state.

This paper supports the view that Bangladesh and by similarity, other secular democracies at its development stage, are vulnerable to the Islamo-fascist movement, putting their continuing economic development at risk. The outcome of the cold war suggests that democracies out-perform autocracies in the long run, with the implication that democracies should be encouraged. Exceptions like Iran and China have huge natural resources that give them, in the short run, advantages that countries like Bangladesh have not. Islamism is a threat to democracy in these countries because Islam and secularism are opposing forces; theocracy is incompatible with democracy; and Sharia culture lacks the liberal social attitudes of democratic societies.

Bangladesh has recently suffered an episode of domestic terrorism that illustrates this vulnerability, and which has not been analyzed in any academic sense. This paper integrates recent information about Islamic extremism in Bangladesh, in particular with respect to Siddiq ul-Islam, popularly known as Bangla Bhai (Bangladeshi Brother), whose Islamist activities began in the 1990s and ended with his execution by the Bangladesh state on 29 March 2007. It identifies missing information and suggests further analysis.

## Historical Context<sup>1</sup>

This section describes the global and national socio-political context of Bangla Bhai's activities which is a necessary basis for understanding his motivation, methods and power. His formative sojourn with the Afghan mujahedin probably exposed him to the influence of jihadists from other countries, in the same time and place of the inception of al Qaeda, and his patronage relationships with legitimate Islamic parties in Bangladesh were key to the reign of terror that his organization Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) perpetrated there.

### *Global Events*

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 transformed Iran from a monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It has been compared to the French Revolution in its impact on the ambitions of Islamists throughout the Muslim world to wrest power from apostate governments and restore them to Islamic rule. The success of the revolution must have encouraged the Mujahedin in Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> This section combines sources including Library of Congress Country Studies and articles from Wikipedia and Banglapedia.

In the Soviet-Afghan war (1979 – 1989), the Soviets escalated their support of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan government to full military operations against the largely Islamic fundamentalist Mujahedin insurgents. The cause attracted jihadists from throughout the Muslim world, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to defend Islam from the infidel invader. Global Salafi jihadists escaping arrest for terrorist activities in their own countries converged in Afghanistan. For example, Ayman Muhammad Rabaie al-Zawahiri of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad met Osama bin Laden there and formed al Qaeda.

In the end the Mujahedin with US support through Pakistan out-endured the Soviets, who withdrew from Afghanistan; having no common enemy now the ethnically distinct militias degenerated into warlordism. From 1995 in Kandahar, Sunni Pashtuns calling themselves “Taliban” propagated a monopoly of violence throughout most of the country. The improvement in security at first earned them the good will of Afghanis but their ruthless authoritarian governance and imposition of an extreme form of Sharia law on a population inclined normally to moderation provided few other effective state functions. Their program to eradicate poppy-growing gained them the appreciation of the US but not the local growers. With few exceptions the rest of the world isolated them.

Following the events of September 11 2001, the US launched its war on terrorism on several fronts: where they could, they froze assets of identified terrorist organizations, denied terrorist groups safe haven, pursued individuals and secured agreements with other nations to do the same. When the Taliban rejected an ultimatum to surrender al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan, the US and NATO allies at first bombed and then invaded, deposing the Taliban and mainly securing the country. Al Qaeda members escaped the tightening net into Pakistan and beyond, to Bangladesh, Burma, Indonesia, Philippines and other Muslim countries where no doubt they continue to foment Islamofascism.<sup>2</sup>

### ***National History***

The environment which spawned Bangla Bhai has roots that pre-date the conception of the Bangladesh state. This section describes Bangladesh's short history in some detail, to bring out the significance of Islamist politics and its patronage of terrorism there.

### **Partition of India**

In 1906 the founding in Dhaka of the All India Muslim League responded to Muslims' fear that their interests would be swamped by the Hindu majority. The party became a driving force behind the creation of Muslim Pakistan in the partition of India in 1947. The peculiar geographic nature of the partition has been problematic ever since. The Punjab region of British India became the Punjab province of West Pakistan and the Indian state of Punjab, and the Bengal province of British India became the Pakistani state of East Bengal (later East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) and the Indian state of West Bengal. Consequently a huge displacement of populations set back economic development for decades and ignited widespread land conflicts, as millions of Hindus and Muslims reshuffled themselves to respective sides of the India-Pakistani borders. To this day minority populations that remained are victims of and contributors to communal violence.

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<sup>2</sup> M.A. Thomas, “Bangladesh: Growing Islamic Identity and Continued Political Gridlock”, Asian Security Handbook, Third Edition, M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2005

## **The Language Issue**

Twenty-four hundred kilometers and North India separated the Pakistan capital Karachi and its satellite Dhaka. East Pakistanis felt exploited by the distant West Pakistan-dominated central government and linguistic, cultural, and ethnic differences contributed to the estrangement. In 1948 the Karachi government attempted to impose Urdu as the sole state language, and its exclusive use in the media and in schools. The issue caused lasting damage to relations between the two regions and exposed internal rifts in East Pakistan when the Muslim League, the ruling party in the East Bengal Provincial Assembly, opposed making Bangla one of the state languages. After controversy and conflict which resulted in the deaths of several demonstrators in 1952, the central government adopted Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan in 1956.

The 1954 election for the East Bengal Provincial Assembly was divisive along lines between pro-Pakistan Islamic and pro-independence secular parties. A coalition of the latter called the United Front led by the Awami Muslim League won handily but the losing Muslim League contrived to foment conspiracies which motivated the central government, wary of East Pakistani independence movements, to dismiss the provincial government.

## **The Liberation War**

The divergence of the two regions of Pakistan widened. The west with a lesser proportion of Pakistan's total population had the greater share of revenue allocation, industrial development, agricultural reforms and civil development projects. The military and civil services were dominated by the West Pakistanis. Just one regiment in the Pakistani Army was Bengali. Furthermore, the Bengali Pakistanis had no enthusiasm for the dispute with India over Kashmir and felt vulnerable to Indian reprisals.

In 1955 the Awami Muslim League changed its name to simply the Awami League, adopting a secular, non-communal platform. When the party won almost all of the East Pakistan seats of the Pakistan's National Assembly in the 1970-71 elections, giving it a majority of the 313 seats, West Pakistani political leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Yahya Khan could not accept a national government headed by the Awami League, with its agenda of "full regional autonomy" for Bengal. They indefinitely postponed the convening of the National Assembly session, precipitating massive civil disobedience in East Pakistan.

A swift and terrible escalation of violence commenced. Reacting to a manifesting independence movement, the central government authorities arrested the leader of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on March 25, causing many of the remaining East Pakistan National Assembly members to flee to India where they formed a provisional government.

The Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight, a planned military pacification, on 25 March with the immediate objective to control the urban centres and ultimately to eliminate all political and military opposition, curbing the Bengali nationalist movement. From that day the West Pakistani forces began a systematic slaughter of civilians, and particularly Hindus. Casualty figures for the entire Liberation War vary greatly, in the range of 200,000 to 3,000,000 Bengali deaths. About eight to ten million people fled to relative safety in India. Hundreds of thousands of women endured rape and sex slavery at the hands of the West Pakistan army and local collaborators.

According to the Asia Times<sup>3</sup>,

At a meeting of the military top brass, Yahya Khan declared: "Kill 3 million of them and the rest will eat out of our hands." Accordingly, on the night of 25 March, the Pakistani Army launched Operation Searchlight to "crush" Bengali resistance in which Bengali members of military services were disarmed and killed, students and the intelligentsia systematically liquidated and able-bodied Bengali males just picked up and gunned down.

Major Ziaur Rahman led the Eighth East Bengal Regiment in a revolt against the Pakistan Army on the night of March 26, and on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he declared the independence of Bangladesh. Resistance against the West Pakistan forces grew as Bengali soldiers deserted to join the Mukti Bahini ("freedom fighters"), the underground Bangladeshi army. A formal command of Bangladesh forces set up in July divided the new country into eleven zones and with extensive Indian support in the form of arms, training and intelligence, mounted attacks on economic and military targets. By August the Bengalis had fielded eleven battalions for conventional warfare and had trained 100,000 guerillas in the Mukti Bahini. The West Pakistanis augmented their forces with five battalions and counted on the collaboration of several Bengali Islamist militias associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami party, which contributed zealously to the persecution of non-Muslim minorities and executions of nationalists and intellectuals.

The West Pakistani forces mainly prevailed; although they had some successful operations, the Bangladesh forces could not take and keep strategic points. The turning point was the ill-advised Pakistani attacks on Indian air bases in the Indian northwest on December 3, apparently motivated by India's involvement in the Bengal conflict. India immediately declared war on Pakistan and invaded Bangladesh with three corps, supported by three brigades of Mukti Bahini, forcing a Pakistani surrender on December 16. In a last spiteful gesture before defeat, the Pakistanis using elimination lists of Bengali intellectuals and with the assistance of the collaborating Jamaat paramilitary forces, slaughtered an estimated 991 academics, journalists, doctors, lawyers and artists, in an attempt to lobotomize the secular element of the new country.

### **The People's Republic of Bangladesh**

Released by the Pakistanis, Sheikh Mujib Rahman returned to Bangladesh to resume his leadership and the establishment of a secular democratic state. In the face of economic and political difficulties he took greatly increased powers and reduced the polity to one-party rule. He was killed with most of his family in a military coup in August 1975.

Ziaur Rahman, now a major-general, founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and assuming the presidency after a coup in 1977, won popular support by stabilizing the economic situation of the country with free-market policies. He amended the constitution to make Islam the state religion, pardoned the assassins of Sheikh Mujib and rehabilitated individuals who had supported the Pakistani Army, all of which effectively strengthened the coalition of the BNP with Islamic parties, including Jamaat. He was assassinated in 1982 in a failed coup. Lt. General Hossain Mohammad Ershad ruled until, at the end of 1990, western aid donors forced his resignation and subsequent elections in 1991, in which the Awami League (AL) prevailed. Since its independence to this point, Bangladesh had had just four years of democracy.

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<sup>3</sup> Debasish Roy Chowdhury. "Indians are bastards anyway", Asia Times, 2005-06-23.

Thenceforth the AL and BNP, led respectively by Sheikh Hasina, a surviving daughter of the deified Sheikh Mujib and Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of the equally revered Ziaur Rahman, have alternated in power. They were more similar in their almost single-minded development of predatory clientelist governments than they are distinguished by philosophic stance. Significantly for the argument of this paper, the AL criticizes the BNP for its historical reluctance to prosecute Liberation War criminals and for its collaborator-bedfellow, the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh party. However, the AL had opportunities to prosecute them also, and did not. In the years 2001 to 2004, Transparency International assessed Bangladesh as perceived to have the highest level of corruption in the world.

### **The Time of Bangla Bhai**

The last elected government of Bangladesh began in October 2001 and ended in October 2006, the period coinciding with the terrorist activities of Bangla Bhai. The BNP ruled in a coalition with three other parties, Jatiya (Ershad's party), Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and Islami Oikya Jote. The Islamic parties' influence in the government contributed to rising fundamentalism that manifested in persecution of minorities, in particular Hindus and Ahmadiyahs, and terrorism. Jamaat-e-Islami has in the past declared that the nation must expand its territory toward the north-east into India's isolated states.

### **Chronicle of a Reign of Terror**



**Bangla Bhai**

The short life of Siddique ul-Islam, also known as Aziz ur-Rahman, Omar Ali or Litu, and popularly as Bangla Bhai (Bengali Brother) began in 1970. He was the third son of Nazir Hossain Pramanik of Karnipara village in Gabtoli upazila of Bogra district. He earned the equivalent of the Secondary School Certificate at Tarafsartaz Madrasah in Bogra in 1989 and later passed the High School Certificate examinations at Azizul Haq College in Bogra. During his Master's studies at Rajshahi University he was involved in Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, banned in Dhaka and Chittagong and the subject of more than 80 distinct Bangladesh news stories involving violence and criminality since 2000. He left the ICS in 1995 after the Jamaat allowed female leadership, which he regarded as a sacrilege. He taught Bangla at Lathiganj School and College and was fired from the position.

### **The Rise of Bangla Bhai**



**Abdur Rahman**

Bangla Bhai met the leader of the outlawed Islamist group Jamaat-al-Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) Shaikh Abdur Rahman through his involvement with Islamist organizations. Abdur Rahman had visited Pakistan and was well-connected with Islamist groups there. At some point in the mid-1990s, the JMB chief sent Bangla Bhai to Afghanistan to acquire tactical, weapons and bomb-making skills. The JMB convened its first conference of JMB commanders at Khetlal in the Joypurhat district in early 2002 and shortly after moved its headquarters to the city of Rajshahi, at the same time forming a militia called Bangla Bahini, led by Bangla Bhai. A police report dated August 17 2002 shows him charged with the attempted

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murder of a local Awami League leader and his daughter.<sup>4</sup> He was released when the charge was dropped three weeks afterward.

Later in 2002 Abdur Rahman assigned Bangla Bhai to a two-year assignment in the port city of Chittagong to develop a militant network in the greater Chittagong region, especially in the three hill districts and Cox's Bazar, and to establish militant training centres in Darul Hadith Salafia Madrasa, Sitakunda and Hathazari.<sup>5</sup> Rewarding him for his Islamist proselytizing and expansion of the militant network in the region, the JMB chief brought Bangla Bhai back to Baghmara, Rajshahi District in 2004 and promoted him to commander of a JMB vigilante sub-group called Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) with an immediate mandate to root out leftist extremist groups in the region, particularly the Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP, aka "Sarbaharas"). The PBCP allegedly killed four relatives and friends of Ruhul Kuddus Talukder Dulu, the BNP Deputy Minister of Lands and Member of Parliament for Natore District, Rajshahi Division.

In the years preceding the rise of the JMB, the Sarbahara, who have long replaced their leftist political ideology with more profitable activities like extortion and violence, would openly carry automatic weapons and machetes through the major roads of Baghmara, with the administration turning a blind eye. Their signature assassination style was to slit their victims' throats ear to ear.<sup>6</sup>

The Daily Star reported on April 1 2004 the murder by JMJB cadres of a PBCP operative at Baghmara, beginning a reign of terror in the region in which Bangla Bhai's name figured prominently. Other media reported assaults on April 10 on other PBCP members in Baghmara and intensifying operations of the JMJB against "Sarbaharas" (Marxist outlaws) and "drug dealers" in the area. 49 PBCP men reportedly surrendered to a joint force of police and JMJB on April 14, and following a JMJB threat to torch the houses of a publicized list of Sarbaharas. 1200 more surrendered their arms on April 24. Several subsequent news stories described the satisfaction of the local police and citizenry with JMJB activities.

Noor Mohammad, Divisional Inspector General of Police in Rajshahi, reportedly told Daily Star on 5 May 2004, that Bangla Bhai and his operatives were assisting the law enforcers in tracking down the left-wing outlaws. According to him, "We've asked police stations to support them whenever they go to catch outlaws." Reportedly, he justified such an action by indicating that "You know Sarbahara [left-wing extremists] men have been quite active in the region for many years and it is not possible for the undermanned and under-equipped police to hunt them down. Aziz [Bangla Bhai] is now helping us."

On May 8, The Daily Star reported the killing of two JMJB militia members by Sarbahara operatives in a village in adjacent Naogaon District following the beating-to-death by JMJB of two "outlaws" there.

The Government, under pressure from the media, opposition parties and donors uneasy about the vigilante activities in Rajshahi, on May 9 ordered a report from the Rajshahi District Superintendent of Police on Bangla Bhai and JMJB, and the Home Ministry engaged an intelligence agency to monitor them. A May 13 story in The Daily Star reported on interviews with Abdur Rahman, Bangla Bhai, other JMJB members and local

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<sup>4</sup> The Daily Star, 28 May 2004

<sup>5</sup> The New Nation, "Profile of Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai", 30 March 2007

<sup>6</sup> "The Rise and Fall of Bangla Bhai", SLATE (monthly feature magazine of The New Age, an English-language daily newspaper in Dhaka), April 2007

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people, which reveal the JMJB intention to establish a Taliban-like culture in Rajshahi and ultimately throughout Bangladesh. They decreed that in Baghmara town prayers are compulsory, men must have beards and women must wear burqas outside the home. Local citizens, previously approving of the reduction of Sarbahara depredations thanks to the JMJB, now began to doubt that they were better hands. When on May 14 JMJB cadres burst into a house in Paba upazila, beat up a woman and demanded that her son be sent to a madrasa, hundreds of villagers alerted by her husband over the mosque loudspeaker captured 19 militants. The police rescued them from the mob and released them. Then they arrested her husband and freed him only when he agreed that the militants had not attacked his house but instead came to offer religious teachings.

JMJB operatives abducted women and tortured them to learn the whereabouts of their Sarbahara husbands. They kidnapped for ransom<sup>7</sup>, extorted “tolls” from villagers and looted their houses.<sup>8,9</sup>

On May 17 the Government instructed the Deputy Inspector General in Rajshahi to arrest Bangla Bhai but by next day no police station had received the order. The Daily Star quoted a senior police officer, on condition of anonymity: “Arresting the lynchpin or stopping his militant activities turned impossible for police, as the JMJB is sponsored by an influential quarter.” The press noted the opposition of BNP ministers from Rajshahi to police action. On that same day, PBCP cadres killed two JMJB men, injured six others and burned three houses in Naogaon. In reprisal the JMJB took three PBCP men from their homes, demanding over the mosque loudspeaker that villagers be present to witness their execution. They beat them to death through the night, relaying their tortured groans by loudspeaker to terrorize the neighbourhood, and villagers found the corpse of one hanging by its feet from a tree bough in the morning. The police claimed to be unaware of these events.



Several thousand JMJB men staged an armed showdown in the northwestern city under police escort on May 22 and declared by loudspeaker that “even Allah himself cannot protect journalists of Janakantha from JMJB men” and asked all local reporters to be mindful of death before writing against JMJB operations.<sup>10</sup>

The Daily Star on May 25 reported that the JMJB hit-listed “a State Minister's brother”, a former legislator and five others including four Naogaon union parishad chairmen for punishment for their alleged links to outlaws. The Government posted a reward of 50,000 taka (then about US\$830) for the capture of Bangla Bhai<sup>11</sup>, an attractive sum in a country with a 2004 GDP per capita of US\$450. Motiur Rahman Nizami, Industries Minister and Ameer of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, expressed doubt about the existence

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2007/04/01/torture-victim-sues-ex-bnp-minister-aminul-huq/>

<sup>8</sup> The Daily Star, 8 June 2004

<sup>9</sup> The Daily Star, 28 June 2004

<sup>10</sup> The Daily Star, 27 May 2007

<sup>11</sup> The Daily Star, 1 June 2007

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of Bangla Bhai and his force in the north-western districts, saying that Bangla Bhai is a figment of the press.<sup>12,13</sup>

With Bangla Bhai remaining underground and in control, the JMJB continued throughout 2004 to dominate 12 unions<sup>14</sup> in Rajshahi and Naogaon Districts, extorting crops and money from villagers in the name of a jihad fund, meeting legal expenses and helping the poor.<sup>15</sup> 27 deaths were attributed to them that year. The National Police arrested JMJB operatives on several occasions but usually released them, allegedly at the direction of high government patrons.

In 2005 the JMJB's reign of terror continued unabated in the northwest, and expanded to other parts of the country. They bombed cinemas and street theatre events which they claimed were "un-Islamic". During the week of February 14 JMJB bombers attacked two offices of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC, the largest NGO in the country) in Sirajganj and Naogaon districts and a branch of the Grameen Bank in Bogra town.

Elements of the Government continued to deny that terrorism or Islamic fundamentalism were significant issues in Bangladesh and to doubt the existence of Bangla Bhai. The press quoted anonymous observations of senior policemen in Rajshahi, that their forces were frightened of JMJB reprisals to actions they might take, and that they had instructions from "influential persons" in the Government not to arrest Bangla Bhai.

On February 23 2005 the Government declared JMB and JMJB to be "banned organizations".

On August 17 in an interval of 30 minutes, time-bombs exploded in 459 locations throughout the country. The bombs contained no shrapnel, indicating an intention to demonstrate capability rather than to kill, and the two deaths and 100 injuries were in that sense accidental. JMB leaflets at the sites and later JMB claims of responsibility removed any doubts about the source of the blasts.

Late in 2005 the JMJB began a campaign against the judiciary:

- October 3 JMB leaflets were found at the sites of bomb blasts at courts in Chittagong, Chandpur and Laximpur, in which two people were killed.
- October 18 a JMB activist, captured at the scene, hurled a bomb which injured a Sylhet judge.
- November 14 a JMB bomber killed two judges in Jhalakathi. The blast also injured the perpetrator who when captured tried unsuccessfully to detonate another bomb strapped to his thigh. This is the only indication of suicide terrorism in Bangladesh.

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<sup>12</sup> The Daily Star, 23 June 2007

<sup>13</sup> The Daily Star, 23 July 2007

<sup>14</sup> A union is a local administrative unit that contains from 15 to 30 villages.

<sup>15</sup> The Daily Star, 10 November 2004

## His Fall



RAB

With this escalation of terrorist activity, and the consequent clamour from the public and international perception of instability, the Government could no longer claim that terrorism was a figment of the press “to tarnish the image of Bangladesh”. The Government increased the reward for information leading to the capture of Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai to the equivalent of US\$152,000 and encouraged the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a national crime-fighting and anti-terrorism force assembled in 2004, to bring them in. This quote, “Since the establishment of RAB, 536 people died in crossfire.”<sup>16</sup>, refers to the number of deaths of people in their custody.

On February 1 2006 the Government fired Masud Miah from his post of Superintendent of Police of Rajshahi District for “patronizing militancy and Bangla Bhai”.<sup>17</sup>

On March 1, security forces led by the RAB forces besieged a house in Sylhet and captured Abdur Rahman. Four days later in Mymensingh RAB personnel arrested Bangla Bhai following a gun-battle. By March 8, 229 cases in connection with the August 17 bomb blasts have been filed against Abdur Rahman, his brother Aatur Rahman Sunny and Bangla Bhai. At a meeting with foreign diplomats, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan strongly advocated vigorous investigation and trial of Islamist militants in a “transparent and open” manner. At the same meeting State Minister Lutfozzaman Babar reported, “So far, 642 militants have been arrested and some 22 awarded death penalty by speedy tribunals.”<sup>18</sup> Many news stories expressed the relief of residents of areas oppressed by the JMJB that the scourge had been taken from them. Abdur Rahman provided a long statement to the police which revealed his terrorist activities in considerable detail<sup>19</sup>, but Bangla Bhai admitted nothing.

On May 29, a trial court in Jhalakathi handed down death sentences to the seven JMB leaders for the murders of the two district court judges there and on August 31, the High Court (HC) upheld the verdict.<sup>20</sup> The condemned men rejected their last avenue for escaping the death penalty by writing Islamist rhetoric, instead of remorseful statements, in their statutory appeals for clemency to the President. Bangla Bhai, Abdur Rahman and four other militants were executed by hanging on 30 March 2007.

## Analysis

The factual information provided in the previous section provides the basis for observations about the nature of Bangla Bhai’s terrorist activities, with reference to literature on terrorism.

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<sup>16</sup> The Daily Star, 6 July 2007

<sup>17</sup> The Daily Star, 2 February 2006

<sup>18</sup> The Daily Star, 8 March 2006

<sup>19</sup> “Deposition of Shaykh Abdur Rahman” Prothom Alo, 7 September 2007

<sup>20</sup> The Daily Star, 30 September 2007

## **Motives**

The declared objective of the JMB is to capture power through armed revolution to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh. Similarly, the JMJB will "build a society based on the Islamic model laid out in the Holy Qur'an and Hadith." These groups inherit the ideology of Salafism as described in Sageman<sup>21</sup>, specifically, that Islam has strayed from the righteous path to become decadent; and must return to the authentic faith and practices of the Prophet Mohammed. The JMJB's attempt to impose Islamo-fascism on communities in the northwest of Bangladesh consciously emulated Taliban culture, taken from Bangla Bhai's experience in Afghanistan in the 1990s. It was also an extension of the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh party's Islamist ideology, and Jamaat government members patronized it as a means to consolidate their political power in the Northwest by exterminating Communist groups and taking other illegal actions unbecoming of a legitimate political party.

Although the sincerity of JMB/JMJB leadership in pursuit of their Islamist ideals cannot be doubted, the JMJB had many of the characteristics of a criminal gang. If the Marxist PBCP can be accused of corrupting their ideological goals in a degeneration to simple criminality, so can Bangla Bhai's group. During the two years of his rule in Rajshahi and Naogaon, the JMJB increasingly extorted money and crops from villagers, kidnapped for ransom, looted NGOs and robbed banks<sup>22</sup> to meet the fiscal requirements of the organization and the personal needs of its members who otherwise had no gainful employment. Their displacement of the Sarbaharas in the region resembles the struggle for criminal power among gangs anywhere.

The motivations of individuals in the JMB and JMJB range from the ideological to the mundane. The groups recruited committed Islamists from returning Bangladeshi Mujahedin like Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai themselves and home-grown Islamists from local madrasas funded by Pakistani and Saudi Arabian Islamist organizations to promote their ideology. Some members were converted Sarbaharas, apparently valued for their competence as terrorists, whose motives must have been simply employment and/or gratification of their craving for brutality and violence.

## **Methods**

This section examines the methods employed by the JMB/JMJB to work toward their goals.

## **Leadership**

Bangla Bhai clearly admired the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. They were/are both very private men of whom little personal detail is known. Bangla Bhai modeled much of his campaign on Taliban tactics in Afghanistan by winning the initial gratitude of the population for relieving them of the oppression of criminal gangs and harshly imposing on them an extreme fundamentalist Islamic culture.

Perhaps because of his relative youth, he was apparently more a "hands-on" leader than his mentor Abdur Rahman. He could wield a hockey stick, long knife or sten-gun as well as anyone, and did. Depending on their position facing or following him, people found him sadistic, ruthless and terrible or charismatic and kind. Although evidently not world-

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<sup>21</sup> Sageman, Marc, *Understanding Terror Networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004

<sup>22</sup> Prothom Alo, 7 September 2007

class, having been ultimately captured and hanged, his strategic sense and organizational skills were considerable, as the intricacy and success of the August 17 2005 country-wide bombing attest.

## Tactics

The JMB/JMJB demonstrate some but not all of the classic terrorist tactics:

**instill fear**            The JMJB used many techniques to terrify the community:

- ◆ brutal murders of people who opposed them
- ◆ visible armed presence
- ◆ use of loudspeakers to amplify the groans of victims being tortured or bludgeoned to death, in public
- ◆ forcing the community to witness these “punishments”

**control the streets**        The JMJB had the monopoly of violence in the region:

- ◆ community members commonly went to the JMJB to resolve disputes rather than to the sub-district authority.
- ◆ the police were afraid to confront them because of high-level government patronage
- ◆ the JMJB taxed and in a limited sense provided services

“We noticed that the rural people have stopped going to UNO (sub-district authority) to resolve small crimes. When we asked union parishad (lowest government level) chairmen how they were handling trials and punishment, they said ‘all the people were going to Bangla bhai’,” said an official.”<sup>23</sup>

**reprisal**                The JMJB and PBCP regularly murdered each others’ members in retaliatory mode.

**provoke over-reaction**    The situation in Bangladesh is not a foreign occupation nor is the JMJB an insurgency, in which provoking over-reaction of the occupier would be intended to influence the population to transfer its sympathies to the insurgents, so this tactic is neither appropriate nor used.

The JMJB are not suicide terrorists. Although they claim to have a “suicide squad”, they have not deployed members in an operation. The JMJB bomber who killed two judges on November 14 2005 tried to kill himself on capture but this was not an intention of suicide terrorism in the fidayeen sense: “individuals kill themselves in order to kill others; not ... to avoid capture”<sup>24</sup>. According to Pape<sup>25</sup>, suicide terrorism is not characteristic of Bangladesh because the majority of instances take place in situations of military occupation to encourage withdrawal of foreign forces.

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<sup>23</sup> The Daily Star, 21 June 2007

<sup>24</sup> Pape, Robert, *The Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism*, 2004

<sup>25</sup> Pape, Robert A, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Random House, 2005

## Recruitment

The JMB/JMJB recruited from university academics, Islami Chhatra Shibir, mosques, madrasas, Rohingya Muslims from the Arakan State of Myanmar, and turncoat Sarbaharas<sup>26</sup>.

## Funding

The JMB is reportedly funded from a variety of sources<sup>27</sup>:

<b>Donors</b>	individuals in Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Libya
<b>NGOs</b>	Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage and Doulatul Kuwait, UAE-based Al Fuzaira, Khairul Ansar Al Khairia, Bahrain-based Doulatul Bahrain and the Saudi Arabia-based Al Haramaine Islamic Institute have provided funding.
<b>Money-laundering businesses</b>	investments in shrimp farms and cold-storage facilities in south-western Bangladesh
<b>Tolls</b>	tolls extorted by JMB/JMJB cadres and collected by affiliated madrasas

## External Influences

Many reports speculate and allege that al Qaeda directly influenced JMB/JMJB but no convincing primary evidence has been produced. Stronger links from other fundamentalist Islamic organizations such as Harakat ul-Jihad-I-Islami/Bangladesh (HUJI-B) to al Qaeda have been shown. Abdur Rahman's close connections in those organizations could have led to the direct support of al Qaeda operatives. Certainly JMB/JMJB leaders would have absorbed all of the material available in the public domain about al Qaeda and its tactics, and admired its actions.

Members of the ruling coalition of BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and Islami Oikya Jote patronized Islamist extremism. They aim to get power by democratic means to make Bangladesh a theocracy under Sharia law. Groups like JMJB and HUJI-B<sup>28</sup> have the same objective, using terrorism. They are mutually supportive. Some writers see links between the outlaw Islamist groups, particularly HUJI-B, and al Qaeda, in the form of funding from Pakistani militant groups, reciprocal visits for providing and receiving tactical training, the al Qaeda safe havens in Bangladesh, and manuals, videos and ideological texts found in Bangladeshi militant camps.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> PG Rajamohan, *Recent Developments in Bangladesh: Implications for Security*, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 11 January 2006

<sup>27</sup> South Asian Terrorist Portal

<sup>28</sup> HUJI-B is an older, more established group which is arguably more dangerous than JMB and JMJB. It is responsible for serious terrorist incidents, including the near-assassinations of the British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Anwar Choudhury, in a bombing on May 21 2004 in Sylhet in which three people died, and the leader of the Awami League party Sheik Hasina on August 22 in the same year, in a grenade attack at a rally in Dhaka, in which 23 party members were killed and hundreds injured. Compared to JMB/JMJB, the group appears to be better led, and judging by its persistence is more resilient to anti-terrorist action. Through its mother organization in Pakistan, HUJI, it is directly connected to international Islamists, e.g., al Qaeda.

<sup>29</sup> M.A. Thomas, 2005

## The Life and Times of Bangla Bhai

The profoundly corrupt BNP and AL governments developed the pyramidal clientelist Bangladesh state by politicizing all governance sectors including and not limited to the administrative bureaucracy, police, armed forces, judiciary, education and health, in short, government at all levels and much of civil society. Careers, livelihoods, business success, access to health services and education, and protection from judicial harassment at all social levels depend(ed) to a great extent on political relationships, nepotism and debts of favours. The Prime Minister indirectly commands the allegiance of rickshaw-pullers, election-riggers and bomb-throwers alike, through the party.

Under cover of the outlaw cleansing, the BNP bigwigs in the North actually intended to stamp their political supremacy over the Rajshahi, Natore and Naogaon region. They effectively used the militants to destroy their political opponents, ensuring BNP's dominance in the long run.<sup>30</sup>

JMB took part in the sarbahara (proletariat) eradication operation in the Baghmara sub-district of Rajshahi. During the operation we killed about 10-12 sarbahara members. Badsa was prominent among them. Bangla Bhai would use the sten-gun recovered from Badsa. In the beginning of the operation, we met deputy minister in charge of land, Ruhul Kuddus Talukdar Dulu in his Natore residence. As I know it, Bangla Bhai had contacts with the Telecommunications Minister Barrister Aminul Huq during the operation.<sup>31</sup>

Many ministers and other politicians in the ruling coalition exploited the JMB/JMJB and other outlawed groups for their own purposes, encouraging them to modify regional power structures in their favour and in turn providing support and protection from the law and opposition forces.

Political patronage of terrorists is a global phenomenon of which examples abound. The cold war was fought in part by proxy terrorist organizations for the US and Soviet powers. The East German government supported West German terrorist organizations including the Baader-Meinhof Gang and the Red Army Faction. Any legitimate political party that wants to be able to deny its involvement in dirty tricks can employ and protect outlaw groups to do its dirty-work.

## Conclusions

Legitimate Islamist parties in Bangladesh persist in spite of their betrayal of Bengal in the Liberation War. Evidently they represent a small but active constituency in Bangladesh. Their patronage of extremist Islamo-fascist groups is a danger to Bangladesh sovereignty and threatens its stabilizing effect in the region as a moderate Muslim country and secular democracy. The environment that spawned Bangla Bhai provides a haven for foreign Islamic extremists including al Qaeda members, protecting them from anti-terrorist forces and giving them opportunities to radicalize domestic Islamists, who in turn may take their jihad back out into the world.

There is concern among observers that the secular underpinnings of moderate Bangladesh are being undermined by a culture of political violence and the rise of Islamist extremists. A further deterioration of Bangladesh's democracy and political stability may create additional space within which Islamist militants may be increasingly free to operate. Such a development may have destabilizing implications for Bangladesh, South Asia, and the Islamic world.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The Daily Star, 21 June 2007

<sup>31</sup> "Deposition of Shaykh Abdur Rahman" Prothom Alo, 7 September 2007

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Vaughn, "Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh", Congressional Research Service, 1 January 2007

## The Life and Times of Bangla Bhai

The growing community of Islamists who demand a Sharia theocracy threatens security and communal stability in Bangladesh. How effective the Government has been in the control of domestic Islamic extremism remains to be seen. The oppression by West Pakistanis in 1947-71 is still a vivid object lesson to modern Bangladeshis and consequently the population vigorously rejects tyranny of the state, capitalists and Islamists. This condition gives hope that future governments of Bangladesh will continue to democratically resist the Islamo-fascist forces arrayed against them.

Jihad and cross-border terrorism as ideology challenge and undermine democracy as a value. The use of force and counter-violence by the security forces is also likely to create a gap between the theory and practice of democracy.<sup>33</sup>

Investigation of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh is necessary to clarify the problem and identify solutions for mitigating the threat. Some productive avenues of research include:

- ◆ study government patrons of outlaw groups to understand their motives and identify institutional reforms that would discourage the behavior
- ◆ study the funding sources and curricula of madrasas to identify inappropriate political influences and propose reforms
- ◆ interview the widow of Bangla Bhai, his extant associates and others to reveal his secretive past, and construct a case study that might support better understanding of Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh
- ◆ study the arrests, trials, convictions, appeals and timing of the executions of the seven JMB/JMJB leaders to understand why the authorities did not learn more from them about the government patronage that sustained them, before they were silenced forever
- ◆ study the HUJI-B group to chronicle its activities, map its network, understand its support base in the Islamist community and parties, and assess its threat to secular democracy in Bangladesh.

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<sup>33</sup> J. Laxmi Narasimha Rao, "Jihad and Cross-Border Terrorism in South Asia", India Research Press, 2004