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## **The Rise of Radicalism in Bangladesh: What Needs to Be Done**

*By Iftekharul Bashar*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*In 2024, Bangladesh faces a growing threat of radicalism fuelled by political instability, security vacuums, and weakened counterterrorism infrastructure. Unless the interim government adopts a zero-tolerance policy and strengthens law enforcement and intelligence efforts, extremist groups may gain further ground, leading to long-term instability.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Bangladesh is facing an increasing threat of radicalism and terrorism. The [political violence](#) and instability of 2024 have worsened the situation, with extremist elements exploiting the security vacuum created by the regime change. Weakened law enforcement and intelligence agencies, along with the rise of armed groups and radical ideologies, pose a serious threat to the country's stability. Bangladesh risks long-term insecurity with broader regional implications without swift and decisive action.

### **The Political Crisis and Its Impact on Security**

2024 marked a turning point for Bangladesh. The ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina through a student-led, opposition-backed upsurge resulted in an interim government led by Dr Muhammad Yunus. Earlier, despite criticism for authoritarianism, Sheikh Hasina's government managed to control radicalism and maintain security, particularly after the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack, which spotlighted Bangladesh's extremist elements.

However, following Hasina's recent fall from power, the political upheaval that erupted created a security breakdown. The chaos amidst the mass protests has provided extremists with opportunities to gain ground. Arms and ammunition looted from police

stations have made their way into the hands of [criminals](#) and extremists. Over [5,800 weapons and 300,000 rounds of ammunition](#) were stolen, and while some have been recovered, many remain unaccounted for, adding to the volatility.

Prison escapes in August 2024 further destabilised the situation. More than 2,200 prisoners escaped, including 70 militants from groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Although some have been recaptured, others remain at large. This, combined with unprecedented [mass bailouts](#) of militants and criminals, signals a collapse in law and order.

The regime change in Dhaka has emboldened local radical groups, which are increasingly visible in the public sphere. There has been a marked rise in extremist rhetoric, including online propaganda, and violence against religious and sectarian minorities has escalated. In 2024, there were 205 reported incidents of [minority persecution](#), including attacks on Hindus and Buddhists. A series of attacks on [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#), as well as [desecrations of Sufi shrines](#), have also been reported.

### **Vulnerability of Bangladesh's Law Enforcement**

The political crisis has severely impacted Bangladesh's law enforcement and counterterrorism infrastructure. Historically, the police have been used as tools of political control, but recent events, particularly the use of excessive force during public protests, have [further damaged](#) their reputation. At least 44 [police personnel](#) were killed during the protests. More than 450 of the country's 664 police stations were [attacked](#), many of which were looted and burned. Additionally, at least 281 police vehicles were [set on fire](#).

Abrupt changes in the leadership, the firing or sidelining of experienced officers, and the disruption of established protocols have weakened the country's security agencies. The Bangladesh Police, particularly in the Dhaka Metropolitan area, has seen a mass transfer of officers due to reputational damage during the protests, further weakening their capacity to maintain order. The [morale of the police force](#) is at an all-time low, with some officers facing [harassment](#), [false charges](#), forced resignations, and even dismissal.

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police faces a [shortage of skilled personnel](#), particularly in the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit, which could hinder efforts to combat terrorism. Within the CTTC, concerns have been raised regarding the influx of new officers, many of whom require additional specialised training. As a result, there are fears that the unit may struggle to respond effectively if terrorism resurges in the future.

### **Radical Ideologies and Growing Extremist Activity**

Groups like Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic State–Khorasan (ISK) have exploited Bangladesh's political turmoil, making strategic statements to promote radical ideologies and rally support. AQIS has praised what it perceives as resistance to corruption and secularism. ISK has promoted jihad and conflict with India, emphasising divine rewards for participation.

Additionally, Islamic State's *Al-Naba* magazine called for an Islamic revival in Bangladesh, urging the youth to reject secularism, focus on ideological education, and fight injustice. These messages aim to capitalise on Bangladesh's political instability and could appeal to disaffected individuals, including local militants, potentially drawing them toward global terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

Bangladesh's vulnerability to radicalisation is compounded by local groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir-Bangladesh (HT-B). Despite being banned, HT-B continued to spread its propaganda online, holding multiple rallies and targeting youth, especially in [schools and colleges](#), advocating for the establishment of a caliphate. The group also demanded a lifting of the ban on its activities. Amid growing public concern, Bangladeshi authorities [arrested](#) HT-B's media coordinator in October, but the group's activities continue.

The global perception of Muslim persecution, particularly in conflict zones like Gaza, Kashmir, and Arakan (Rakhine State of Myanmar), has further fuelled radicalisation within Bangladesh. In recent months, there has been an uptick in extremist content in the Bangladeshi social media domain, including popular platforms like Facebook and YouTube.

Certain extremist preachers have also seen their following grow, while those without relevant qualifications are also being allowed to address mass public events. Such aggressive marketing of violent and hate-filled extremism has been unprecedented in recent years and may lead to an ecology in which radicalism and violence are normalised.

The vulnerability of the country's youth is a major concern. Radical groups are increasingly targeting [youth](#), offering an alternative to the perceived failures of the government amidst political turmoil. The ideological battle is no longer confined to the physical space but is actively being fought online, where extremist organisations recruit and indoctrinate individuals. The growing presence of these groups suggests that the threat of radicalisation is not just a passing phase but could become a long-term security challenge.

### **The Need for Immediate Action**

The interim government, led by Dr Muhammad Yunus, faces a monumental challenge in reversing the rise of radicalism. Immediate steps are required to restore law and order and to rebuild the counterterrorism infrastructure. Securing prisons and police stations should be the government's top priority, as recovering looted weapons is critical to prevent them from falling into the hands of extremists.

Rebuilding Bangladesh's counterterrorism capacity is equally important. This requires restoring the morale of law enforcement agencies and ensuring that experienced officers are retained and adequately equipped. Efforts must be made to prevent insider threats and extremist infiltrations within security forces. The government must prioritise the re-establishment of effective policing and intelligence agencies.

Bangladesh needs a firm, zero-tolerance approach to extremism. While the interim government has [claimed](#) such a policy, it must back up its words with decisive action.

The legal system must be empowered to criminalise extremist propaganda, and strict enforcement of these laws is essential. The Prevention of Violent Extremism (PCVE) initiatives, which have been sidelined during the political turmoil, must be revived. Engaging civil society organisations and international partners will also be crucial in developing comprehensive counter-radicalisation strategies.

### **A Path Forward for Bangladesh**

To counter the rise of radicalism, the interim government must act swiftly to restore stability and address the underlying causes of radicalisation. Bangladesh can stem and reverse the tide of extremism by prioritising surveillance and law enforcement, strengthening counterterrorism efforts, and promoting community-based initiatives. However, this will require a strategic vision and foresight, strong political will, a long-term commitment to reform, and collaboration with domestic and international partners. Without these efforts, the threats of radicalism and terrorism will continue to grow, destabilising Bangladesh and the broader region.

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*Iftekharul Bashar is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798