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The End of the Obama Era in Asia

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
and Nicola Mocchi

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BANGLADESH 2016: A LABORATORY FOR ISLAMIC RADICALISM

Marzia Casolari

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In 2016 political violence continued to upset Bangladesh. Radical Islam continued to rage in the country and to disseminate terror: people belonging to ethnic and religious minorities, along with moderate Muslims were brutally killed. The violence escalated in 2016, reaching its apex with the 1 July attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery, in central Dhaka, a café attended especially by foreigners. In the attack, 22 people were killed, among them 9 Italians and 7 Japanese, mostly garment businessmen.

In spite of the alarming political climate, the Bangladeshi economy was prosperous, with a GDP growth at about 7%: Chinese and Indian investments played a prominent role in improving Bangladesh's economy. However, labour conditions and workers' rights remain critical.

The Bangladeshi government enhanced international relations by strengthening ties with the United States and India.

1. Introduction

The two main issues on the 2016 Bangladesh political agenda were terrorism and violent extremism, and a high economic growth involving high social costs.

Bangladesh has been shaken by political violence since 2013.¹ The attacks on religious minorities, secular persons and moderate Muslims have occurred at a steady pace particularly since 2015.² In 2016 they reached a new high on the night of 1 July, when the Holey Artisan Bakery café in central Dhaka was attacked by a commando of seven armed men. In the attack 22 people were brutally killed. In spite of persistent political instability, the economy performed very well in 2016, with a GDP growth of about 7%. The main factors of Bangladesh's growth were the strengthening of the relations with India, India's and China's investments in the energy and infrastructure sectors and an improved planning of Bangladesh economy. However, Bangladesh's growth is still facing several challenges, especially labour conditions and workers' rights.

1. Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme: dallo scontro politico alla guerriglia urbana', *Asia Maior* 2013.

2. Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015: The emergence of radical Islam', *Asia Maior* 2015, pp. 311-338.

The Bangladeshi government attempted to overcome terrorism and political insecurity by enhancing Bangladesh's international position through stronger ties with two powers: the United States and India.

2. *The Holey Artisan Bakery attack*

On the evening of 1 July 2016, an armed commando of 7 men attacked the Holey Artisan Bakery, a restaurant in Gulshan, Dhaka's diplomatic enclave, where most foreigners concentrate. It is the same area where Italian social worker Cesare Tavella was killed in September 2015.³ The commando stormed into the restaurant, shooting while shouting «Allah Akbar». The assailants immediately killed two people and kidnapped 20 more. Among the prisoners were 7 Italians, most of them garment businessmen. The restaurant is very close to the Italian Embassy and it is attended by foreign businessmen of the garment sector, Bangladesh's leading industrial production. ISIS claimed the attack right from its initial phases with a communiqué to the press agency Amaq, recorded by SITE Intelligence Group. The attack was also claimed by Ansar al-Sharia Bangladesh, a local organization affiliated to Al-Qā'ida.⁴ The double claim by the two main organizations of the international *jihad* is explained by the competition between them for hegemony in South Asia.⁵

All employees of the restaurant were able to escape.⁶ The jihadists captured more than 30 people, but only 13 survived. The terrorists questioned the prisoners and those who were not able to repeat the Koran verses were killed, while Muslim Bangladeshi were spared. The prisoners were tortured and killed slowly with sharp weapons, most probably machetes, as reported by the Director of the Army military operations, Brig. General Nayeem Ashfaq Chowdhury.⁷

Among the victims there were 9 Italian citizens, 7 Japanese, 5 Bengalis, one of them with American citizenship, 2 policemen and an 18-year old

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 320-321.

4. 'Bangladesh, commando assalta bar di Dacca e prende ostaggi: anche italiani. Rivendica l'IS', *la Repubblica*, 1 July 2016; 'Strage Is a Dacca, 20 morti: 9 sono italiani. I testimoni: «Torturato chi non conosceva il Corano»', *La Stampa*, 2 July 2016; 'Strage dell'Isis a Dacca, 20 morti. «Recita il Corano»: così hanno torturato e ucciso gli «infedeli»', *Corriere della sera*, 2 July 2016; 'Dacca, Isis sgozza gli stranieri in un ristorante. Venti morti: 10 sono italiani', *il Giornale*, 2 July 2016; 'Bangladesh siege: Twenty killed at Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka', *BBC News*, 2 July 2016; «God wants you to die»: Dhaka's long night of terror', *CNN*, 5 July 2016; 'Bangladesh, l'Isis a Dacca ha fatto la sua strage', *Panorama*, 7 July 2016.

5. 'Strage Is a Dacca'.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*; 'Dhaka cafe attack ends with 20 hostages among dead', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2016.

Indian girl. At least 26 people were wounded. Of 6 terrorists, 5 were killed and 1 captured.⁸

The police attempted to seize the restaurant in the evening of 1 July, but without success as the jihadists were armed with guns and grenades. Then the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Bangladesh's special security force, intervened. In order to reduce collateral damage as much as possible, a complex operation was planned during the night and the restaurant was raided by the security forces in the early morning of 2 July. They cleared the restaurant after a 4-hour battle with the terrorists and rescued 13 people.⁹ Between 30 and 35 agents were wounded.¹⁰ The day before the attack the investigators in charge of inspecting social media intercepted several messages on Twitter, announcing an attack in Dhaka. The authorities then intensified the controls on embassies, and the police closed some of the main hotels and restaurants surrounding the Holey Artisan Bakery.¹¹

After the raid, the police released the pictures of the bodies of five assailants¹² who had been identified: they were Nibras Islam, Rohan Imtiaz, Meer Saameh Mubasheer, Khairul Ismal and Shafiqul Islam.¹³ All of the terrorists were born in Bangladesh and five had been wanted because they were suspected of being affiliated to radical groups.¹⁴ All of them belonged to the banned Jamatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB) and were young Bangladeshi men, from middle class families, with a good educational background. They had gone underground between December 2015 and March 2016. Their families reported them missing, but the authorities did not investigate their activities.¹⁵ On 3 July it was discovered that the mastermind of the attack was Tamim Chowdhury, *nom de guerre* Shaykh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, a Canadian citizen born in Windsor, Ontario.¹⁶

8. 'Strage Is a Dacca'; 'Dacca, Isis sgozza'; 'Bangladesh Misread Warnings Posted On Twitter Hours Before Cafe Attacked', *Reuters*, 6 July 2016.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. 'Bangladesh still denies ISIS role in Dhaka hostage horror', *CBS News*, 3 July 2016.

13. 'Bangladesh Misread Warnings'. A sixth man, Saiful Islam Chowkidar, the pizza chef at the Holey Artisan Bakery, was also shot dead by the police who confused him with one of the assailants.

14. 'Bangladesh, l'Isis a Dacca'.

15. 'Bangladesh still denies', 'Terror attack: The Bangladesh government cannot afford to pretend it's business as usual', *Scroll*, 7 July 2016; 'Il ministero del Bangladesh: I terroristi erano ricchi e istruiti. Dubbi sulla matrice della strage', *La Stampa*, 3 July 2016.

16. 'Bangladesh, l'Isis a Dacca'.

3. *The reactions to the attack: some controversial arrests*

As an immediate reaction to the attack, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina decreed a two-day mourning period.¹⁷ On 5 July she presided over the commemoration function at Dhaka stadium, where she censured terrorism.¹⁸ In a television address to the nation, following the attack, she implored viewers to stop violence in name of the Islamic religion, defining Islam «a religion of peace».¹⁹ Like in 2015,²⁰ the Prime Minister and other Bangladeshi authorities denied that the IS (Islamic State) had played a role in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack. While police Inspector General A.K.M. Shahidul Hoque admitted that the authorities did not exclude that possibility, the Interior Minister denied any IS involvement in the attack and any presence of the Islamic State in Bangladesh.²¹

The Prime Minister asserted that terrorists were trying to destroy Bangladesh and to turn it «into a failed state»; she vowed to get the country out of the turmoil.²²

After the end of the 11-hour siege, two former hostages were taken into custody by the police, who suspected they were involved in the attack. The two men, holding a dual Canadian-Bangladeshi citizenship, were Hasnat Karim, age 47, and Tahmid Khan, a 22 year old student of Toronto University who was back in Dhaka on vacation.²³ The two men were detained for over a month, before being formally arrested on 4 August.²⁴ The fact is controversial as, according to Bangladeshi law, a suspect can be detained for more than 24 hours only with the authorization of a magistrate, which was not the case with Karim and Khan. More than a week after the attack, the families of the two suspects had not yet received information of their relatives' whereabouts.²⁵ Moreover, the authorities had contradictory behaviour. While the police claimed that both men had been released, later on the Home Minister admitted that Hasnat Karim was still in custody.²⁶

17. *Ibid.*; 'Bangladesh PM Hasina decrees mourning after the attack', *Aljazeera*, 3 July 2016.

18. 'Bangladesh, l'Isis a Dacca'; *Ibid.*; 'Dhaka cafe attack'.

19. 'Bangladesh PM Hasina decrees'.

20. M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015', pp. 321-324.

21. 'Bangladesh still denies'; 'US Issues Travel Warning For Bangladesh After Cafe attack', *Reuters*, 11 July 2016; 'Bangladesh Police Blames Terror Group For Dhaka Café Attack', *Reuters*, 9 July 2016.

22. 'Bangladesh PM Hasina decrees'.

23. 'Bangladeshi Police Arrest 2 Suspected of Terror Attack on Bakery', *The New York Times*, 4 August 2016.

24. 'British man formally arrested over Bangladesh cafe siege', *The Telegraph*, 4 August 2016.

25. 'Bangladeshi Police Arrest 2 Suspected'.

26. 'British man formally arrested'.

The suspicions of the inquirers were raised due to some footage showing the two men apparently helping the attackers. In some videos they also carry weapons.²⁷ Other hostages reported that the two men were forced by the attackers to help them.²⁸ An amateur video and photographs show Karim talking with the terrorists inside the restaurant and on the terrace respectively.²⁹ Other hostages reported that Karim was talking and walking with the terrorists.³⁰ According to Karim's lawyer, he was forced to do so because he was used as a human shield.³¹ However, in a photograph Karim seems to be peacefully smoking a cigarette on the terrace with the killers.³²

In spite of police suspicion, the images and witnesses do not clearly suggest any wrongdoing by Karim and Khan.³³ The circumstances may also suggest that they were trying to negotiate with the militants, trying to keep the situation under control, in order to avoid a bloodbath.³⁴

The police had found a note with Karim's home address in the pocket of one of the militants,³⁵ but this detail is very controversial: in fact, Karim might have given it to the killer in order to obtain his confidence.³⁶

On the night of the attack, Hasnat Karim was at the Holey Artisan Bakery to celebrate his 13 year old daughter's birthday with his wife and two children.³⁷ It seems therefore rather improbable that he could be involved in aiding the attack. However, the fact that Karim and his family were allowed by the terrorists to leave the restaurant about half an hour before the army raid raised police suspicion.³⁸ Hasnat Karim and Tahmid Khan, like other hostages, had been spared by the assailants because they were Muslims,³⁹ but for the police this was a possible proof of Karim and Khan's connections with the terrorists.

Tahmid Khan was released on bail in early October,⁴⁰ whereas Karim was still in jail at the end of the year and his bank accounts were still frozen.⁴¹

27. 'Bangladeshi Police Arrest 2 Suspected'.

28. *Ibid.*

29. 'British man released from Dhaka cafe questioned over links to Isil attack', *The Telegraph*, 4 July 2016.

30. 'Bangladesh cafe attack: Two arrested but families say they were hostages', *CNN*, 5 August 2016.

31. *Ibid.*

32. 'Il docente che soffriva di depressione e quella sigaretta con il commando', *La Stampa*, 5 July 2016.

33. 'British man released'.

34. 'Il docente che soffriva di depressione'.

35. 'British man formally arrested', 'British man released'

36. 'Il docente che soffriva di depressione'.

37. 'British man formally arrested'.

38. 'British man released'.

39. 'Bangladeshi Police Arrest 2 Suspected'.

40. 'Student Arrested After Dhaka Cafe Attack Acquitted of Terror Charges', *Reuters*, 3 October 2016.

41. 'Bangladesh Bank Freezes Hasnat Karim's Bank Accounts', *Dhaka Tribune*, 16 November 2016.

However, the investigation about Hasnat Karim was based on contradictory proof. All evidence collected by the police was poor and it seems unlikely that Karim involved his wife and children in such a gruesome situation. Karim might be a scapegoat:⁴² after all Bangladeshi police and authorities had previously attempted to appear efficient after a similar attack, which openly targeted foreigners. A prompt reaction was required and Karim and Khan had the requisites to be prosecuted.

After the attack, Bengali authorities were under the pressure not only by national and international public opinion, but especially by foreign governments, in particular those who had faced the greatest casualties. The Bangladeshi police were in a frenzy to appear efficient and, as a consequence, made serious mistakes, for instance when, during the raid, they killed a pizza chef at the Bakery, who was confused with a militant.⁴³

Karim and Khan's case triggered criticism not only from their families, but also from traditional and social media and human rights organizations, which were concerned about the violations of laws by the police and feared that the two men in detention might be tortured.⁴⁴

In June 2016, following a series of politically motivated killings, the government ordered the arrest of 10 to 14,000 people.⁴⁵ Most arrested were petty criminals⁴⁶ and only about 150 were militants.⁴⁷ This kind of operation seems to be aimed more at intimidation than at a proper investigation, as an accurate inquiry is impossible with such huge numbers. In actuality, the Holey Artisan Bakery attack occurred only two weeks after the crackdown.

4. The intensification of security activities after the attack: evidence of ISIS involvement

After the attack, the police raided suspected hideouts and reportedly killed dozens and arrested hundreds.⁴⁸

In August the investigators identified a certain Marjan as the supposed «coordinator» of the Café attack and released his photograph. As already pointed out, Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury was identified as the mastermind of the attack. The police placed a 20 lakh Taka (approximately US\$

42. This hypothesis is considered in 'Il docente che soffriva di depressione'.

43. 'Bangladesh Misread'.

44. 'Bangladesh Cafe Attack'; 'Bangladeshi Police Arrest 2 Suspected'.

45. 'Bangladesh Cafe Attack'; 'Bangladesh arrests over 14.000 in extremism crackdown', *CNN*, 21 June 2016.

46. *Ibid.*

47. 'Bangladesh arrests more than 11,000 after wave of killings', *CNN*, 15 June 2016.

48. 'New Evidence Reveals Deep ISIS Involvement in Bangladesh Massacre', *The Wire*, 1 December 2016.

25,500) bounty on his head.⁴⁹ The police captured Chowdhury in a hideout in the outskirts of Dhaka and killed him on 26 August. Other two Islamist militants were killed with him.⁵⁰ Chowdhury was a 30 year old Canadian national, born in Bangladesh. In 2013 he returned to his native country, where he is believed to have played a prominent role in funding the activities of radical organizations and recruiting militants.⁵¹

Chowdhury was part of a well organized network. Investigators had discovered that IS had intensified its connections with Bangladesh. In December Dhaka police seized approximately 3.9 Taka (about US\$ 50,000) destined for an associate of Chowdhury. The money had been sent via a *hawala*⁵² cash transfer from a company based in the UK. Its owner, Siful Sujan, had been killed in Syria. However, there was no evidence that the money was sent under IS's instructions.⁵³

The preparation of the attack began in June 2016, at the start of the month of *Ramadan*.⁵⁴ Chowdhury had at least two accomplices, Abu Terek Mohammad Tajuddin Kausar and Tanvir Kaderi, who aided in organizing the attack.⁵⁵ The latter killed himself when, on 10 September, the police raided the flat where he and his family were hiding.⁵⁶

Several elements contradict the government's thesis that IS does not exist in Bangladesh. An exponent of the government asserted that in Bangladesh there are militants with IS links, but this does not mean that the IS is there.⁵⁷ In April 2016 Chowdhury granted an interview to *Dabiq*, the renowned IS magazine, under his *nom de guerre* Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif.⁵⁸ The magazine defined al-Hanif the head of IS in Bangladesh.⁵⁹ An article by Chowdhury on the café attack was published after his death by the other IS's magazine, *Rumiyah*.⁶⁰

49. 'Picture of Dhaka Terror Attack «Coordinator» Released: Report', *Reuters*, 12 August 2016; 'Bangladesh, uccisa la «mente» dell'attacco al ristorante di Dacca: morirono anche 9 italiani', *la Repubblica*, 27 August 2016,

50. 'Bangladesh, uccisa la «mente»'; 'Bangladesh Security Forces Kill Mastermind Of Dhaka Cafe Attack', *Reuters*, 27 August 2016; 'New Evidence'.

51. 'Bangladesh Security Forces Kill the Mastermind'; 'New Evidence'.

52. The *hawala* cash transfer is an informal system of transferring money worldwide used mainly in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The cash is moved through a network of trusted persons.

53. 'New Evidence'; *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

5. *Bangladesh, a laboratory of radical Islam*

The extent of IS's presence in Bangladesh is difficult to be ascertained at present. However, the country appears to be a laboratory of jihadism. The 1 July attack was the result of an escalation of political violence started in 2013, with the killings of bloggers, intellectuals and media people, reaching its peak in 2015.⁶¹ At the periphery of the developed world, a politically unstable country, where violence is the order of the day and the security forces have not been particularly efficient in dealing with political criminals, Bangladesh is the ideal place to experiment with new tactics and plan actions. Attacks on independent media in Bangladesh, for instance, started in 2013, two years before the Charlie Hebdo attack. The targets and tactics are strikingly similar to those used in terrorist attacks in Europe. The organizations of radical Islam have an extraordinary capacity to communicate. What happens in one part of the world has an immediate impact on the opposite side of the world. In the last three years messages, videos and instructions have been crisscrossing the world, while Bangladeshi law enforcement authorities and the international community have been culpably inattentive. Moreover, the intricate network of Bangladeshi jihadist organizations continues to be insufficiently known.⁶²

It would be interesting to investigate the objectives of Bangladeshi radical Islam, apart from turning the country into an Islamic State. It has been asserted that a main objective of the Bangladeshi jihadists is to undermine the garment industry.⁶³ It seems probable that Bangladeshi organizations of radical Islam aim to replace foreign interests with domestic ones in the highly profitable sectors of Bangladeshi industrial production and development aid. The Bangladeshi organizations of radical Islam have a high financial capacity: they control the Islamic Bank of Bangladesh Ltd. (IBBL), supported by Saudi Arabia, and several NGOs, some financed by Saudi Arabia as well.⁶⁴ Bangladeshi radical Islamists are capable of moving huge quantities of money. It might be plausible that they are also trying to take over the sector of garment industry, by spreading terror among the foreign businessmen, in order to discourage them from carrying out their affairs in Bangladesh. Immediately after the 1 July attack the embassies of the United States and other western countries issued travel warnings to their nationals, advising those in the country to be careful and avoid public places.⁶⁵ Some foreign investors cancelled all business travels in the country,⁶⁶ which resulted in a likely damage to the garment industry that is worth US\$ 26 billion.⁶⁷

61. M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015', pp. 321-324.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 327-328.

63. 'New Evidence'.

64. M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015', pp. 327-328

65. 'Bangladesh still denies'; 'US Issues Travel Warning'.

66. *Rainews 24*, 2-3 July 2016 broadcasts; 'Bangladesh Misread Warnings'.

67. 'Bangladesh Misread Warnings'; *Ibid.*

Perhaps the Prime Minister and the Interior Minister are not totally wrong when they blame domestic rather than international organizations for the attacks.⁶⁸ Perhaps these two theses – predominant IS's involvement or exclusive domestic responsibility in terror attacks in Bangladesh – are not mutually exclusive, as they appear to be at first sight. In other words, it is possible that both IS-related organizations and domestic terrorist outfits are active in promoting terror in Bangladesh.

The series of attacks from 2015 to 1 July 2016 clearly prove that one of the main targets of Muslim militant organizations is made up of foreign professionals.⁶⁹ Most likely the Holey Artisan Bakery was not casually chosen, but carefully selected for its clientele. It was probably not a coincidence that most of victims were Italian and Japanese businessmen of the garment sector and aid workers.

6. Attacks on minorities go on

Between January and June 2016 the main deadly attacks on individuals belonging to minority groups, non-Sunni and moderate Muslims, secular bloggers and publishers amounted to 21. In addition, an uncountable number of assaults on crowds during religious functions or on political parties representing the indigenous communities took place.⁷⁰ Between January and June 2016 violence against Hindus resulted into the burning of 66 houses, the destruction of 49 temples and monasteries and 24 people being injured.⁷¹ Hindu priests and Buddhist monks were the main targets, but also ordinary believers belonging to different groups and sects were attacked. Harassment and retaliation cases have been taking place on an almost daily basis. The assailants have often been identified as members of the Awami League.⁷² In many cases officials and agents were complicit in the attacks. Several of these crimes appeared to be connected with personal feuds or political motives.⁷³

On 23 April Rezaul Karim Siddiquee was killed. He was a professor of English at Rajshahi University, the second most important university in Bangladesh.⁷⁴ The Professor was literally massacred with a hatchet. IS

68. 'Bangladesh still denies'; 'US Issues Travel Warning'; 'Bangladesh Police Blames'.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 320-324.

70. 'Under Threat: The challenges facing religious minorities in Bangladesh', *Minority Rights Group International*, November 2016, pp. 15-17.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

74. 'Islamic State claims it killed Bangladeshi academic', *The Guardian*, 23 April 2016; 'Bangladesh, professore ucciso a colpi d'ascia', *la Repubblica*, 23 Aprile 2016; 'Rezaul Karim Siddique: Murderd Bangadeshi professor «not an atheist» daughter says', *BBC*, 24 April 2016.

claimed the murder.⁷⁵ This murder was particularly outrageous for the country, not just for its brutality, but especially for the peculiarity of the target. Prof. Siddiquee was killed because English literature was considered a blasphemous subject by the militants. One of the killers was a former student of Siddiquee.⁷⁶ Radicalization in Bangladeshi universities is increasing and professors feel threatened: they are very self-conscious during their lessons and restrain themselves in order to not offend any group. They fear for their own lives and those of their relatives.⁷⁷

At the end of 2016 another wave of attacks on Hindu temples and individuals and on indigenous groups shook the country. On 30 October hundreds of Muslims ravaged 15 Hindu temples and the houses of about 100 families in a Hindu area in Nasirnagar, Brahmanbaria district, northeast of Dhaka. More than 100 people were injured, while the police were watching, inactive.⁷⁸ Other attacks occurred across the country. The pretext was an allegedly offensive image posted on Facebook by a Hindu, Rasraj Das. Subsequently, the intelligence discovered that Das was not responsible for the upload.⁷⁹ It was not clear who propagated the image,⁸⁰ but, considering the inflamed political situation, it could have been a machination to justify the attacks. Bangladesh's Human Rights Commission defined the attacks a «preplanned conspiracy» and began an investigation.⁸¹ Several suspects have been arrested and the police officer in charge in Nasirnagar has been suspended. Local Awami League members were involved and three of them have been suspended.⁸² The owner of a cyber café has been arrested as the mastermind of the attacks on Hindu temples and properties.⁸³

On 4 November a second attack on Hindus took place first in Brahmanbaria district and, then, in Sirajganj and Jhalakathi districts on 6 November.⁸⁴ The Santal indigenous group and the Hindu minority in Gailbandha district had been subjected to similar attacks for a fortnight since 7 November, following a land dispute.⁸⁵ Two Hindu temples were vandalized

75. 'Bangladesh Security Forces'.

76. 'Inside Bangladesh's killing fields: bloggers and outsiders targeted by the fanatics', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2016.

77. *Ibid.*

78. '10 temples destroyed in Brahmanbaria, over 100 injured', *Dhaka Tribune*, 3 November 2016; 'Attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh', *The New York Times*, 16 November 2016; 'Attacks on Hindus, indigenous people expose Bangladesh's growing intolerance', *Scroll*, 21 November 2016.

79. 'Attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh'; 'Attacks on Hindus, indigenous people'.

80. 'Attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh'; *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Ibid.*; 'Attacks on Hindus, indigenous people'.

83. 'Bangladesh: Hindu temple vandalised, 7 idols smashed in fresh attacks on minority institutions', *Firstpost*, 4 December 2016.

84. 'Attacks on Hindus, indigenous people'.

85. *Ibid.* Santals are one of the oldest and largest groups of indigenous people of South Asia. In Bangladesh they concentrate especially in north-western areas.

and idols destroyed in Netrokona and Pabna districts on the night of 4 December 2016.⁸⁶ Respectively, seven and three statues of the goddess Kali were destroyed. The attacks were well orchestrated and have been explained as attempts to land grabbing, to the detriment of local religious and ethnic minorities.⁸⁷

Land grabbing is a persistent issue in Bangladesh. This practice especially affects the northern districts, where Hindus and tribal groups are concentrated. These groups faced all kinds of pressure and abuses, attacks and rapes. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands forced to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere to survive. The victims of land grabbing have organized throughout the years and raised their voice in marches and demonstrations. In 2015 the Awami League government promised to set up a special land commission, but nothing has happened ever since.⁸⁸

Santals, the people most affected by land grabbing, are the largest tribal group in South Asia, living on rice and vegetable cultivation, hunting and fishing. The lands where they live are valuable not only from an agricultural point of view, but also for the large quantities of natural resources in their subsoil. This has triggered the interests of corporations and multinationals, who are accused of being behind the land grabbing.⁸⁹

According to the Properties Return (Amendment) Act of 2011, Hindu families have the legal right to reclaim their properties, but in practice many victims are unable to do so, in part because of government officials' obstruction.⁹⁰

Not only are the rights of the minorities at risk in Bangladesh, but so is secularism. Secularism - one of the four fundamental principles of the original 1972 Constitution - was removed from the constitution in 1977 by Ziaur Rahman (President from 1977 to 1981). In 1988 the then President General Muhammad Ershad declared Islam the state religion. The Committee against Autocracy and Communalism then filed a petition, requiring that secularism be re-established. After 28 years, in 2010, the Supreme Court rejected the petition, ruling that the petitioning organization did not have the *locus standi* and therefore it did not have the right to be heard in the court. Finally, in 2016, the Supreme Court took an ambivalent decision: it declared secularism to be a fundamental principle, but upheld Islam as state religion.⁹¹

86. 'Bangladesh: Hindu temple'.

87. *Ibid.*; 'Attacks on Hindus, indigenous'.

88. 'Thousands march against land-grabbing in Bangladesh', <http://www.ucanews.com>, 17 November 2015.

89. 'Land grabbing in Bangladesh', *Al Jazeera*, 12 May 2012.

90. 'Under threat'.

91. 'Bangladesh court upholds Islam as religion of the state', *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2016.

In 2011 the current Awami League government amended the Constitution, emphasizing secularism and «equal status» for other faiths as constitutional principles.⁹²

A substantial transformation of the legal and educational systems and of the attitude of the media, both traditional and social, is required to stop discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities.⁹³ In December 2015 Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina assured state protection to Christian leaders after a series of attacks against their community.⁹⁴

8. John Kerry's visit to Bangladesh: Strengthening Bangladesh-US security cooperation

As already pointed out, Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury was killed just two days before John Kerry's visit to Bangladesh. Also, a few hours before his arrival the police killed two suspected JMB members.⁹⁵

The US Secretary of State arrived in Bangladesh on 29 August for a short visit on his way to India to discuss security issues with Sheikh Hasina after the recent wave of killings and the 1 July attack. John Kerry met also opposition leaders and exponents of the civil society.⁹⁶

According to Michael Kugelman, of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington D.C., «One of Kerry's core intentions in Dhaka will simply be to emphasize the importance that the US accords to security problems in Bangladesh».⁹⁷ According to Kugelman, Washington underestimated the increasing security threats in Bangladesh, which affect also the West and the US.⁹⁸

This was John Kerry's only official visit to Bangladesh,⁹⁹ but «the diplomatic quarters» defined it as «significantly important».¹⁰⁰ The Secretary of State believed that IS elements were connected with operatives in Bangla-

92. *Ibid.*

93. A deeper analysis of the issue would be worthwhile. For a better insight see the already quoted 'Under threat: The challenges facing religious minorities in Bangladesh'.

94. *Ibid.*

95. 'Kerry visits Bangladesh for talks on security', *Al Jazeera*, 29 August 2016; 'US Secretary of State John Kerry has arrived in Dhaka on his maiden visit to the country', *bdnews24*, 29 August 2016; 'Kerry: US increasing counter-terror work with Bangladesh', *CNN*, 30 August 2016.

96. 'Kerry visits'; *Ibid.*

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*; 'Kerry: US'; 'IS believed to be 'connected' to BD operatives: Kerry', *The Daily Star*, 29 August 2016.

100. 'IS believed'.

desh.¹⁰¹ He agreed with Sheikh Hasina and other Bangladeshi authorities on additional intelligence and security cooperation¹⁰² and offered US assistance to solve security problems in Bangladesh.¹⁰³

Bilateral talks on security had been started in the past, but the relationships between the two countries had remained tepid, especially due to Dhaka's indecisiveness regarding US offers of assistance to tackle the terrorist menace.¹⁰⁴ The purpose of Kerry's visit was to overcome Bangladesh's scepticism and to enhance a Bangladesh-US security partnership.¹⁰⁵

In 2012 the two countries started the Bangladesh-US Security Dialogue, a cooperation programme concerning a wide range of issues. Bilateral meetings have been held yearly, either in Dhaka or in Washington.¹⁰⁶

The 5th round of the dialogue was held in Dhaka on 2 October 2016. Kamrul Ahsan, Additional Foreign Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led the Bangladesh delegation, including representatives from several Ministries and Government organization. The members of the American delegation were William Monahan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, representatives of the Departments of State and Defence, United States Ambassador Marcia Monicat and Embassy officials.¹⁰⁷

As on previous occasions, the issues under discussion were the «security partnership between the two countries, strategic priorities and regional security issues, defense cooperation, civilian security cooperation, UN peacekeeping and counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism».¹⁰⁸ Both countries acknowledged: «the importance of a deeper and stronger partnership» in addressing mutual security concerns while upholding the values of human rights and fundamental freedoms.¹⁰⁹ The United States representatives appreciated both Bangladesh's «zero tolerance» against terrorism and violent radicalism and the Bangladeshi government «not allowing its territory to be used for terrorist activities against other countries».¹¹⁰

The Holey Artisan Bakery facts were the focus of the 2016 Dialogue. It was decided to create a Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC)

101. *Ibid.*; 'Kerry: US increasing counter-terror work with Bangladesh', *CNN*, 30 August 2016.

102. *Ibid.*

103. 'Kerry visits'.

104. 'The Rise of US-Bangladesh Counterterror Cooperation', *The Diplomat*, 2 September 2016.

105. *Ibid.*

106. 'Bangladesh-US security dialogue to be held in Washington on Sep. 11', *bdnews24*, 7 September 2015.

107. United States Embassy in Bangladesh, 'Joint Press Statement After U.S.-Bangladesh Security Dialogue', 2 October 2016 (<https://bd.usembassy.gov/joint-press-statement-u-s-bangladesh-security-dialogue-today>).

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.*

110. *Ibid.*

Unit under Dhaka Metropolitan Police.¹¹¹ The Bangladesh delegation asked for enhanced United States training, equipment and logistic support in activities concerning counterterrorism, contrasting violent radicalism and disaster management.¹¹²

The US had already been assisting Bangladesh in enhancing its disaster preparedness through the joint Disaster Response Exercise and Exchange (DREE), the funding of the construction of 600 multipurpose cyclone shelters in coastal areas and the provision of fast moving boats to the Bangladesh Coast Guards to minimize the response time against piracy within Bangladesh's boundaries.¹¹³

The US delegation praised Bangladesh for its participation in UN peacekeeping operations and in the Global Peace Operations Initiative financed by the United States.¹¹⁴

9. An outstanding economic growth

The Bangladeshi government pursues two ambitious economic goals: to «graduate» to a middle income country within 2021 and to evolve into a developed country within 2041.¹¹⁵ In 2015 the World Bank upgraded Bangladesh to a middle income country, although in reality it is a lower middle income country.¹¹⁶

Bangladesh's economic performances are astonishing for many analysts,¹¹⁷ especially considering its critical political situation.¹¹⁸ In 2015 foreign direct investments had a 44% increase from the previous year, while, thanks to «the economic success», life expectancy grew from 56 to 70 years.¹¹⁹

In April 2016 the World Bank reported that «Bangladesh economy remained strong and resilient despite external and internal challenges».¹²⁰

111. *Ibid.*

112. *Ibid.*

113. *Ibid.*

114. *Ibid.*

115. 'Economic Goals: Surpassing China!', *bdnews24*, 21 December 2016.

116. *Ibid.*

117. 'Bangladesh to be a 'growth outperformer' in 2016-25', *The Daily Star*, 2 September 2016; Sajeeb Wazed, 'Bangladesh's hidden story: A booming economy', *The Diplomaticourier*, 2 May 2016. Sajeeb Wazed is the chief information technology adviser to the government of Bangladesh but, above all, he is Sheikh Hasina's son: his enthusiastic evaluation of Bangladesh's economy might be influenced by his position. In his article, referring to foreign investors, Wazed defined Bangladesh «a smart place to put their money», totally neglecting the alarming political situation.

118. Hasan Mazumdar, 'The Cry for Inclusive Economic Growth in Bangladesh', *The Asia Foundation*, 16 November 2016.

119. S. Wazed, 'Bangladesh's hidden story'.

120. World Bank, 'Bangladesh Development Update: Economy Requires Focus on Sustainable and Inclusive Growth', 30 April 2016.

Bangladesh is among the top 12 developing countries with over 20 million people that achieve a 6% growth. Inflation declined from 6.5% in March 2015 to 5.65% in March 2016. Food inflation decreased from 6.4% to 3.4% thanks to good rice harvests, lower international food prices and stable exchange rates.¹²¹ However, non-food inflation increased from 6.1% to 8.4%, due to suppressed internal demand, increase of wages and rise of electricity and gas prices. The budget deficit was expected to rise, due to a reduced revenue collection in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016-2017.¹²²

Several factors continue to hinder growth: power and energy shortages, credit shocks, lack of reform continuity, infrastructure bottlenecks. It is estimated that to develop the country's infrastructure, US\$ 410 billion financing is required, twice the size of the GDP.¹²³ Although the government has already approved some important reforms regarding special economic zones, exports processing zones and labour rights, their implementation must be enforced.¹²⁴

Remittances continued to decline in 2016, due mainly to the global economic crisis.¹²⁵

Private investments were still stagnant, even declining in the first half of FY 2016-17 from 1.5 to 1.3%.¹²⁶ However, Sheikh Hasina promised greater support to the private sector. At a seminar titled «New Economic Thinking: Bangladesh 2030 and Beyond», organized by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry on 20 December 2016, the Prime Minister assured traders and investors that her government will continue to support the private sector by «establishing a trade-friendly atmosphere».¹²⁷ The Prime Minister announced that Bangladesh may become the 29th largest economy in the world in 2030 and the 23rd in 2050. Within 2021, electricity will be distributed over the whole country, which is expected to be poverty free in 2030 and to reach a per capita income of US\$ 12,600 in 2041. In the same year Bangladesh should become the central «hub» of regional commerce.¹²⁸

Bangladesh is pursuing an «open market policy» and is developing sub-regional and international relations.¹²⁹

121. *Ibid.*

122. *Ibid.* See also Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh, *An Analysis of the National Budget for FY2016-17*, Dhaka, 3 June 2016. The FY in Bangladesh goes from 1 July to 30 June.

123. 'Bangladesh Development Update'.

124. *Ibid.*

125. 'Remittances continue to underperform this year', *The Economist*, , 1 April 2016; 'Remittances see a sharp fall in July', *The Economist*, 28 July 2016; 'Remittances still depressed by global trends', *The Economist*, 31 August 2016; 'Remittance inflows fall sharply in September', *The Economist*, 3 October 2016.

126. 'Bangladesh Development Update'.

127. 'Govt will continuously support private sector to boost economy: Hasina', *bdnew24*, 21 December 2016.

128. *Ibid.*

129. *Ibid.*

10. *The dark side of Bangladesh's economic growth*

Unfortunately Bangladesh's remarkable economic growth and promising expectations have enormous social costs. The workers' conditions are still deplorable and safety of working places is far from being satisfactory.¹³⁰ On 10 September 2016 a fire broke out after a boiler exploded at Tampaco Foils Ltd., a plastic packaging factory in the Tongi BSCIC industrial area of Gazipur, near Dhaka. The fire caused the collapse of the five story building: more than 30 people were killed.¹³¹ The factory provided packaging for other companies, including Nestlé and British American Tobacco.¹³²

The Tampaco Foils accident was the worst industrial disaster after the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013, when 1,137 workers lost their lives and about 2,500 were injured.¹³³

According to the first independent survey of the garment industry, issued after the *Rana Plaza* disaster, the factories producing for the biggest international retailers failed to implement the renovations required: 62% among them lack viable fire exits; 62% do not have a proper alarm system; 47% have structural problems.¹³⁴ Renowned retailers like Walmart, Gap, Target and their affiliates, including North Face, Timberland, Wrangler and several others, set up a voluntary organization named Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. Unfortunately, it unilaterally postponed the deadlines for repairs and improvements from 2014-15 to 2018.¹³⁵ A recent report titled «Dangerous Delays on Worker Safety» discovered that, out of 107 factories labelled as regular by the Alliance, 99 had not completed the safety improvements. The report has been published by the International Labour Rights Forum, the Worker Rights Consortium, the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Maquila Solidarity Network.¹³⁶

A survey carried out by the Overseas Development Institute¹³⁷ on 2,700 slum households disclosed that child labourers living in slums worked an av-

130. This issue has been treated in M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015', pp. 331-333.

131. 'Factory boiler blast at Tampaco Foils Bangladesh packaging plant kills dozens', *Deutsche Welle*, 10 September 2016; 'The Unsung Heroes of the Tampaco Factory Fire', *The Diplomat*, 22 September 2016.

132. 'Labour groups respond to explosion at the Tampaco Foils Factory in Bangladesh', *Clean Clothes Campaign*, 10 September 2016; 'Bangladesh factory fire kills 23, injures dozens more', *Reuters*, 10 September 2016; 'Tampaco death toll rises to 33', *Dhaka Tribune*, 13 September 2016; 'Labour leader, rights group demand fair compensation to Tampaco fire victims', *The Daily Star*, 19 September 2016.

133. M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme', pp. 172-174.

134. 'Retail group approves Bangladesh factories as safety concerns persist, report finds', *The Guardian*, 21 November 2016.

135. *Ibid.*

136. *Ibid.*

137. 'Child labour and education. A survey of slum settlements in Dhaka', *Overseas Development Institute*, December 2016.

erage of 64 hours a week. Two thirds of the girls were working for the garment industry, while 15% of the children between 6 and 14 years old did not go to school and worked full time.¹³⁸ Over 36% of the boys and 34% of the girls reported that they experienced extreme fatigue and were often mistreated. In July 2016, a nine year old boy was tortured at one of the largest spinning factories in the country.¹³⁹ The mill assistant administrative officer was arrested, while the owner and other accused managers who had fled were wanted. The police raided the factory and rescued 27 children, many aged under 14, who were returned to their families.¹⁴⁰

Recently, Bangladesh enforced several ambitious reforms preventing child labour, among which the National Plan of Action (2010), the National Children Policy (2011) and the Children's Act (2013). However, «a comprehensive legal framework for protecting children against child labour» was still missing.¹⁴¹

11. Bangladesh, between China and India

Bangladesh has become the crossroads of an increasing geopolitical rivalry between China, India and Japan, with the US backing the latter two.¹⁴² The rivalry has been taking the shape of a race, especially between China and India, to obtain billionaire contracts for infrastructural and power plants investments. At the beginning of 2016, India's state-owned Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) was about to sign a US\$ 1.6 billion contract with Bangladesh for the construction of a coal-fired power station in the Khulna district of southern Bangladesh, defeating the competition of the Chinese Harbin Electric International Company. The Khulna power station will be the largest foreign project implemented by an Indian Company.¹⁴³ The Indian media defined the BHEL episode as a «second setback» for Beijing, after the failure of a long and failed ne-

138. 'Child labour «rampant» in Bangladesh factories, study reveals', *The Guardian*, 7 December 2016.

139. *Ibid.*; 'Bangladeshi child labourer 'tortured to death' at textile mill', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2016. A similar murder took place in August 2015: M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015', p. 339.

140. 'Bangladeshi child labourer'; *Ibid.*

141. 'Child labour and education'.

142. 'India set to seal major power deal in Bangladesh, beating China', *Reuters*, 22 February 2016; Sarath Kumara, 'Indian power deal with Bangladesh highlights geopolitical rivalry', *World Socialist Web Site*, 5 March 2016; 'Big India-Bangladesh power deal dims China's shine in South Asia', *Asia Times*, 10 March 2016. Regarding India's, China's and Japan's investments in Bangladesh see Marzia Casolari, 'Old Patterns, New Trends', *Asia Maior 2014*, pp. 230-239.

143. *Ibid.*; 'India set to seal major power deal', 'Indian power deal with Bangladesh', 'Big India-Bangladesh power deal'.

gotiation with Bangladesh to build the Sonadia deep-sea port, near Chittagong.¹⁴⁴

A spokesman of the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company, a joint venture set up to build the power plant, reported that BHEL was the lowest bidder. The impression is that the BHEL agreement was part both of India's strategy to undermine China's economic and strategic interests in South and South-East Asia, and of the US's pivot to Asia.¹⁴⁵ Bangladesh's Planning Minister A. H. M. Mustapha Kamal admitted that the deal could not proceed because both India and the US were against the Chinese initiative.¹⁴⁶

India's interests in Bangladesh are part of its «Act East Policy», aiming at promoting its investments in South-East Asia and the South China Sea.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the Sonadia port would have increased China's presence in the Bay of Bengal and would have been too close to Indian Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Both were weighty enough reasons to induce India to prevent the realization of the Chinese project.¹⁴⁸

With the ports of Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, of Hambantota in Sri Lanka and of Gwadar in Pakistan, Sonadia was part of both the so called Chinese «string of pearls strategy» and the «One Belt, One Road initiative», based on the construction of a series of ports along the strategic sea route connecting the Indian Ocean with the Persian Gulf and East Africa. For China the sea lanes are vital for its oil and raw material supplies.¹⁴⁹

In the period under review Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina strengthened the India-Bangladesh relations.¹⁵⁰ Indian businessmen and investors attending the Bangladesh Investment and Policy Summit in January promised to invest US\$ 11 billion in several infrastructure projects, including a gas pipeline from Orissa to Bangladesh.

India was building a road, rail and waterways transit route to the North-East States through Bangladesh, bypassing the Siliguri Corridor, to connect India's mainland with these remote areas.¹⁵¹

In spite of its increasingly close relation with New Delhi, Dhaka carries out a balanced policy aiming at maintaining good relationships with both China and India.

On 13 October 2016 Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh. It was the first visit of a Chinese head of state in 30 years.¹⁵² The Chi-

144. Marzia Casolari, 'Old Patterns, New Trends', *Asia Maior 2014*, pp. 230-239.

145. 'Indian power deal with Bangladesh', *Ibid.*

146. *Ibid.*

147. *Ibid.*

148. *Ibid.*

149. *Ibid.*

150. On India-Bangladesh relations see M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015', pp. 336-338.

151. 'Indian power deal with Bangladesh'.

152. 'Wake up, India! BIMSTECK is a reverie', *Indian Punchline*, 11 October 2016; 'China has overtaken India to become Bangladesh's largest energy partner',

nese president announced several agreements, among others the construction of two coal-fired power plants respectively in Payra, in the southern district of Patuakhali, and in Banshkhali-Chittagong, for 1,320 MW each. For the first time a China-Bangladesh cooperation agreement exceeded the average size of Bangladesh-India cooperation.¹⁵³

The strongest Bangladesh's *entente*, however, is still with India. From 17 to 19 December 2016 Sheikh Hasina's first official visit to India took place. It was a hugely symbolic occasion, as it coincided with the 45th anniversary of India's recognition of Bangladesh's independence.¹⁵⁴

Narendra Modi did not miss the occasion to transform the visit into an «anti-Pakistan spectacle»,¹⁵⁵ as the programme included the honouring of the Indian soldiers who lost their lives in the 1971 liberation war. The talks between Modi and Sheikh Hasina, focussed on border security and anti-terrorism agreements, were described as «fruitful».¹⁵⁶ Both countries need to strengthen anti-terrorism cooperation.

Sheikh Hasina's visit to Delhi was preceded by the visit of the Indian Defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar, to Bangladesh on 30 November 2016. Parrikar met with Sheikh Hasina, her defence advisor, retired Major General Tariq Ahmed, and the President, Abdul Hamid. The purpose of the visit was to discuss «a new defence cooperation framework».¹⁵⁷

Parrikar's visit was considered by local and international analysts as part of the struggle for influence in Asia between India and China, and came as a response to China handing over two US\$ 203 million worth diesel electric sub-marines to the Bangladeshi Army.¹⁵⁸ Beijing was particularly concerned by Washington's increasing closeness with New Delhi, which is seen as aiming at involving India in the military encirclement of China.¹⁵⁹

Scroll.in, 22 October 2016.

153. 'China has overtaken India'.

154. M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'Bangladesh won't pivot to India but amity is possible', *Indian Punchline*, 7 December 2016.

155. *Ibid.*

156. *Ibid.*

157. Sarath Kumara, 'Indian defence minister visits Bangladesh', *World Socialist Web Site*, 8 December 2016.

158. *Ibid.*

159. *Ibid.*