



ISD

Powering solutions
to extremism
and polarisation



ONLINE EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH

CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD

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Executive Summary

Bangladesh has witnessed an exponential increase in internet and social media penetration in the past year alone, with COVID-19 sending more and more people online.¹ Social media has assumed a pivotal role in disseminating local and international news and is viewed as a faster and less censored medium through which to stay updated than traditional media. Unfortunately, international and domestic extremist actors have benefitted from and capitalised on this increased internet penetration – domestic YouTube channels affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) collectively increased by over 100,000 subscribers at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example.²

The government of Bangladesh and civil society organisations (CSOs) across the country have started addressing the rise in domestic extremism through a range of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) initiatives. Among others, the Ministry of Education has organised public awareness-raising campaigns about extremism and terrorism, while the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTC) has launched mobile apps that allow citizens to report potential terrorist activity to the Dhaka Metropolitan Police.³ However, there is little comprehensive research available about the online extremist landscape to inform P/CVE responses. While there has been research on this phenomenon offline,⁴ few studies focus on the potential for, and implications of, violent extremist narratives spreading online, and there has been no mapping or analysis of online extremist narratives in Bangladesh. There exists, therefore, an important knowledge gap about the nature and scale of online extremist content in Bangladesh, which is essential to fill in order to design and deliver informed and effective P/CVE policies and programmes.

To address this need, the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD) conducted an online mapping exercise to investigate the main extremist narratives deployed in Bangladesh in 2019 and 2020. Using a mixed method of quantitative data processing and expert qualitative analysis, ISD identified the main narratives used by Islamist extremists online, including how the COVID-19 pandemic has been exploited to polarise and further extremist agendas. ISD also looked for alternative or counter-messaging to this content to understand the landscape of and gaps in response. Based on these findings, a series of recommendations are provided for government, local authorities and civil society to help inform a more comprehensive response to these online harms. The findings from this study will also inform multi-agency work that ISD's [Strong Cities Network](#) (SCN) is carrying out with City Corporations in Bangladesh.

Key Findings

- **Extremist narratives in Bangladesh are framed mostly around victimhood, presenting international and domestic conflicts as evidence of the systematic oppression and persecution of Muslims.** This focuses almost entirely on religion, with both secular and non-Islamic religious communities blamed for the perceived decline of Islamic values and practice domestically and globally.
- **Polarising, reductive narratives perpetuated by Islamist groups online are weaponised to accuse the government of actively seeking to erode Islam.** Islamist groups pit themselves as morally superior “defenders of the faith” against injustices faced by Muslims in the region and abroad. Online narratives enforce a dichotomy between just and pious Islamic governance (achieved by implementing an extremist interpretation of the *Shari’ah*) and what is perceived as corrupt, incompetent or illegitimate secular democracy.
- **Although authorities have worked to remove targeted death threats, the underlying narratives of hate and personal culpability that drive them remain prolific.** Public figures that deviate from extremist understandings of what it means to be Muslim are accused of actively undermining Islam, rather than passively being “led astray”, and are prone to *takfir*, or excommunication. While the CTTC has responded and removed direct threats from social media, the underlying hate that drives them is still present online.
- **Anti-secular narratives reinforce the notion of Islamism as the only solution to contemporary frustrations, domestically and abroad.** This is supported by selective retellings of Islamic history that portray the 1971 war of independence as a missed opportunity to create an Islamic state; ignore the pluralistic heritage of the Bay of Bengal; glorify the conquests of the early Islamic Caliphates; and draw negative comparisons with the state of the *Ummah* today.
- **The most extreme material is posted by profiles and pages that are not directly affiliated with offline organisations or parties and that thus have a degree of autonomy.** 93% of extremist posts ISD researchers identified contain visual content (photo or video), thus prompting users to engage more interactively with the content. Women-only branches of known groups are also active online, perpetuating gendered narratives that present Islamism as an ally of women’s rights.
- **Efforts to counter extremism online are limited. Extremist content and hate speech remains even where violence is incited.** This is reflective of past ISD research that suggests social media platforms lack the linguistic resource and/or contextual understanding to identify and take down non-English harmful content.⁵ There is also limited response from the grassroots. A historic concentration of P/CVE programmes in Dhaka may be leaving online narratives unaddressed in rural areas and other divisions.

Recommendations

- **There is a clear need to deepen understandings of online extremist content targeting Bangladeshi communities.** Beyond cybersecurity operations focused on detection and intervention, analysis of this material and its circulation should inform community-based resilience programmes that are better able to respond to extremist narratives as well as the grievances they seek to exploit. A majority of offline community-based programmes and implementers are currently operating with little to no knowledge of the online environment.
- **Government, civil society, and international partners need to strengthen engagement with social media platforms and tech. companies to improve their capacity to regulate content in Romanised Bengali and Bengali script.** These efforts should prioritise Facebook, given the disproportionately high penetration rate it has compared to other mainstream platforms like Twitter.
- **Alternative/counter-narrative campaigns and strategic communications initiatives could be better targeted through a consistent understanding of the actual (rather than assumed) narratives of extremist content online.** Reinforcing pluralism and interfaith harmony, tackling divisive sectarian/religious hate, and countering narratives that distort historical and cultural heritage are key priorities for such campaigns. Gender-specific counter-narratives and interventions should be developed to account for gendered extremist content and women-only branches of extremist groups.
- **Developing and deploying effective educational responses must form a critical part of Bangladesh's P/CVE efforts.** In particular, digital literacy and digital citizenship education to provide support to young people around personal safety, behaviour and thinking critically online is an urgent need in the face of all kinds of extremist, malicious, and disinformation content online. The need for this has only increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Local governments have a critical role in P/CVE, beyond their current remit of awareness-raising, to develop credible and effective community partnerships that build long-term resilience against the underlying hate and polarisation that extremists seek to exploit.** As government units engage with communities on a wide range of public services, they are presented with a crucial opportunity for building trust, demonstrating good governance, and understanding and ultimately impacting how hateful and extremist speech and content online plays out in communities. Expanding SCN initiatives beyond the Bangladeshi capital will also help tackle the over-focus of P/CVE initiatives in Dhaka.
- **Once empowered by national authorities and informed on digital and community-level risks, local government administrations should map key partners, services and stakeholders in their locality that can support P/CVE and resilience efforts.** Building partnerships between critical services, including key civic stakeholders, is a necessary first step to more coordinated prevention.

Introduction

Bangladesh's domestic challenge with extremism and terrorism is underscored by the 1200+ lives that have been claimed by terrorist violence since the 1980s.⁶ Violence has ranged from large-scale attacks, like the Holey Artisan Bakery shooting in Dhaka that killed 20 in 2016, to targeted killings of secular bloggers. Supplementing this is the range of movements at play in the country - international groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) are present alongside domestic movements that operate separately or on behalf of ISIS and AQIS.⁷ Politically, Islamist voices have grown increasingly critical of the secular government, in a public battle over Bangladeshi identity and the status and integration of Islam in the country's governance. This tug-of-war between secular-leaning voices and Islamist extremists is amplified online and has created a breeding ground for hateful and polarising discourse that, left unchecked, will continue to have severe public safety implications.

The violent debate between secular and Islamist extremist voices is rooted in and shaped by the country's history, going back to its independence war with Pakistan in 1971. Efforts by Pakistan to quell the insurrection resulted in clashes with Bangladeshi nationalist forces that resulted in an estimated three million dead, many of which were civilian casualties.⁸ While the war came to a decisive end after the intervention of India, tensions persisted between domestic parties that had taken opposite sides in the war. On the one hand, the pro-secular Awami League and others led the nationalist movement against Pakistan. On the other, political Islamist movement Jamaat-e-Islam (Jel) favoured remaining part of an Islamic Pakistan over the establishment of an independent, secular nation – Jel activists therefore allied with Pakistan's army and are tied with some of the worst crimes committed during the war. Despite the atrocities Jel is linked to, its leadership has since been invited to ally with the Bangladesh National Party (BNP)⁹, which strives for an independent Islamic, rather than secular, Bangladesh. The integration of Jel into a mainstream political party helped consolidate its political presence and credibility across the country.¹⁰

Since then, Bangladesh's political landscape has been defined by often violent and inflammatory discourse between the Awami League and the BNP-Jel alliance, exploited in turn by domestic extremist groups. In the early 2010s, for example, the Awami League set up a tribunal for war crimes committed in the independence war, which resulted in the conviction and sentencing of prominent Jel leaders. The trials sparked protests by both affiliates of Jel and secular activists. Jel and its student wing, Chatra Shibir, accused the tribunal of disproportionately targeting Jel, claiming the tribunal was a mechanism for centralising the Awami League's political power.¹¹ Secular activists, on the other hand, were displeased with the life sentence given to the accused Jel leaders, and gathered in Shahbag Square, Dhaka, in 2013 to demand the death penalty. The Supreme Court's concession to the Shahbagh movement's demands, and the consequent execution of Jel leaders, sparked a wave of Islamist militancy against what extremists perceived as an overreach of secularism.¹² Pre-existing groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harakut-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) resurged alongside the emergence of new groups like Ansar al Islam (also known as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)), resulting in a rise of extremist attacks across the country.¹³ Among others, targets have included atheist and/or secular bloggers,

religious minorities, LGBTQ activists, social workers, and foreign nationals – an Italian aid worker was shot dead in Dhaka’s diplomatic zone in 2015, for instance.¹⁴ While many of the targeted killings and large-scale attacks, like the Holey Artisan Bakery shooting, were claimed by ISIS or AQIS, perpetrators were reportedly locals acting on behalf of ISIS and AQIS through local groups like JMB and Ansar al Islam. This sheds light on the interplay between domestic and transnational movements, and on the ability of international groups to mobilise domestically.

The country also continues to struggle with the humanitarian crisis caused by the displacement of millions of Rohingya, who fled persecution in Myanmar and are currently hosted by Bangladesh in refugee camps mostly in Cox’s Bazaar. The Rohingya refugee crisis is leveraged as a narrative for radicalisation (e.g. seeking revenge for the Rohingya) while the refugees themselves are seen as potential targets for recruitment.¹⁵ Further, the crisis has polarised Bangladeshi host communities, with some wary of the economic resource required to sustain the camps, for example.¹⁶ With the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping through the country, millions are now faced with economic deprivation and starvation, creating new vulnerabilities that may be co-opted and exploited by violent extremists.

In this context, the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD) conducted digital analysis to better understand how extremism manifests online in Bangladesh. Importantly, while the role of the internet in amplifying extremist discourse is recognised internationally, little research has been done to understand the scope and scale of this in Bangladesh. This gap in knowledge impedes local and national abilities to respond effectively to online extremism and its impact in communities. ISD’s digital research sought to fill this gap by mapping and analysing extremist content on social media in Bangladesh and, in turn, providing a series of evidence-based recommendations for government and civil society.

Methodology

To analyse the nature and volume of online extremist content in Bangladesh, ISD combined natural language processing with expert manual analysis of posts collected between September 15 2019 and June 15 2020 (9 months). The research questions that underpinned this methodology are:

- What is the scale of extremist content on social media in Bangladesh?
- What are the key narratives perpetuated in this content?
- How do specific events such as COVID-19 impact extremist speech?

This research used ISD's [definition of extremism](#), which is:

Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based "in-group" over all "out-groups", and propagates a dehumanising "othering" mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Extremist groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their world view. They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means. Extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike.

The methodology began with ISD's regional experts compiling keywords that could be used to capture online extremist content in Bangladesh. These keywords were entered into [CrowdTangle](#), a commercial social listening tool that aggregates data from public Facebook pages and groups. 92 Facebook pages and groups were compiled through this process.

This dataset was then taken to Method52, a natural language processing tool designed by the [Center for the Analysis of Social Media](#) (CASM). CASM and ISD researchers used the tool to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the dataset than would have been possible via CrowdTangle. Firstly, Method52's "surprising phrase detector" was used to identify keywords in the Facebook dataset that were not accounted for in the initial keyword list compiled by ISD's regional experts. The "surprising phrase detector" compares a given dataset (in this case from Facebook) with a reference corpus of text in the same language, to identify words or phrases that occurred more frequently in the dataset than in the reference corpus. Upon completion of this process and of a manual review of all keywords, **a final list of 388 Bengali keywords** was taken forward to scrape social media. This list of keywords was used to compile posts from Facebook, Twitter and Bangladeshi media sources that contained one or more of the 388 keywords. 111,142 Facebook posts, 10,622 articles and 8,066 Twitter posts were collected between September 2019 and June 2020. Given the substantially larger amount of Facebook posts, and that Facebook constitutes about 95% of Bangladesh's social media usage,¹⁷ researchers focused their analysis on the Facebook subset alone.

Method52 was then used to classify the subset of 111,142 Facebook posts. Using a relevancy/irrelevancy classifier that was trained by ISD's regional experts and therefore informed by contextual expertise, irrelevant posts (posts not determined as extremist) were removed from the subset. Based on strict application of ISD's definition of extremism, a total of **1,458 posts were determined to be extremist**. This subset was manually coded to draw out key narratives and propagators, while Method52 was used to supplement manual coding with quantitative analysis.

Analysis - the landscape of online extremism in Bangladesh

Through automated and manual analysis of the 1,458 posts categorised as extremist, ISD researchers identified prominent extremist narratives in Bangladesh and their propagators. Our findings largely reflect the political context and history of the country, with most narratives attacking secularism and, conversely, presenting Islamist governance as the only solution to domestic and international grievances held by Muslims.

Propagators and Tactics

Propagators of extremist content online in Bangladesh can be loosely categorised into three groups: (1) named political Islamist groups and their leaders; (2) anonymous groups and individuals (not affiliated with any formal organisation or party); and (3) media organisations. The scope of content per group varies. For example, while ISD researchers found no violent content in pages and profiles affiliated with the first group, material overtly calling for violence was found in the second group, perhaps because their anonymity provides a degree of autonomy.

- **Named political Islamist groups and their leaders, including Jel, Hefazat-e-Islam (Hel) and Hezb-ut-Tawheed.** Posts from pages and profiles in this subset consisted primarily of victimhood narratives that claim Islam is being oppressed domestically and internationally. Posts in this subset also bring attention to the community work and philanthropic efforts of these groups, providing a softer image of extremism that may appeal to larger audiences. This subset includes pages specifically for women, belonging to women-only branches of groups like Hezb-ut-Tawheed.
- **Anonymous Islamist groups that operate exclusively online.** Pages and profiles in this subset share significantly more extreme and violent content than the previous subset. Although these groups have been subject to social media moderation, this has been largely ineffective as new accounts are created to replace banned ones. While these groups also share victimhood narratives, these are often supplemented with calls to action, particularly for jihad and/or political upheaval.
- **Media organisations that repackage and amplify extremist content.** This includes organisations that aren't overtly extremist but still share extremist rhetoric, particularly regarding minorities, which speaks to a dangerous mainstreaming of hateful narratives. Also included in this subset are explicitly extremist news sites like al-Firdaws and Ummah News, the latter of which is affiliated with AQIS and Ansar al Islam ideologue Shaikh Tamim al Adnani.¹⁸ In this context, it is important to note that Bangladesh ranks 151 out of 180 countries in freedom of press,¹⁹ and has been falling in rank since 2016. With an increasingly restrictive media landscape, people might be pushed to alternative or fringe online media sources, like al-Firdaws and Ummah News, where there is more autonomy to share potentially harmful rhetoric.¹

Some accounts, particularly in the first subset, had subscriber counts of over two million at the time of data collection, speaking to the potential reach of the polarising content being posted.

1 While this research focuses on extremism on Facebook, ISD researchers have separately uncovered extremist content in Bengali-language across the open web. This includes websites like Ummah News and others supportive of, or otherwise linked to, AQIS and ISIS. ISD has also uncovered efforts by extremists to sustain and resurrect previously defunct extremist sites. More research needs to be done to understand the interconnectivity of these networks on social media.

Tactics

Of the 1,458 Facebook posts ISD researchers classified as extremist, only 110 (7.5%) were solely text-based. This speaks to the multi-modal nature of extremist content in Bangladesh, with 996 (68%) posts containing photos and 352 (24%) containing video content. Photos used were generally very graphic or emotive (see Case Study One below) and likely used as “clickbait” to draw users in and elicit engagement with the content. Photos, videos and text-based posts often contained external links to books, sermons, news articles and extremist propaganda. Extremist content online in Bangladesh is essentially very interactive, with visual and external content prompting audiences to engage more actively with the content. The high level of engagement of this content is also reflected in quantitative analysis of reactions per post – 372 (26%) posts had over 100 likes, while 307 (21%) posts had over 100 comments, for example.

Victimhood Narratives - the Oppression of Muslims and Islam

International conflicts and the persecution of Muslims in places like Myanmar are used by terrorist movements like ISIS to radicalise and recruit.²⁰ Victimhood narratives perpetuated by extremists in Bangladesh reflect this global trend, while also leveraging national inter-religious tensions. These narratives are inflammatory and founded in conspiracy, driving “us-versus-them” sentiments that pit (Islamist) Muslims against non-Muslims.

For example, ISD researchers identified victimhood narratives that claim the Bangladeshi government is driven by an anti-Islam agenda and that frame national policies and action as “proof” of this agenda, warning of a consequent, impending decline of Islam across the country. Other victimhood narratives focused on Bangladesh claim imported medicines and values are corrupting Islamic practice – one post claims, for example, that non-Muslims, particularly Hindus, are creating healthcare clinics in Bangladesh “to murder... the upcoming Muslim generation”.

Case Study One - “Murder of the upcoming Muslim generation”

Pictured is a screenshot of a post by a support page for Shaikh Tamim al Adnani, who is affiliated with AQIS and Ansar al Islam. Here, a video is shared from al Adnani’s news site, Ummah News, which entails conspiracies about Hindus and other non-Muslims importing foreign science in a veiled attempt to “murder” Muslims. Engagement with the post was significant, with over 650 shares and 2,000 responses.

ISD researchers uncovered a vast network of Facebook pages supportive of al Adnani and Ummah News. Dubbed the “Ummah Network”, at least 15 support pages are publically accessible. Content shared ranges from anti-Western conspiracies to rhetoric that accuses the government of Bangladesh of shirk (e.g. “*taghut* government”). Responses to these posts are generally supportive of these narratives – ISD found messages encouraging *jihad* to create an Islamic State in Bangladesh, for example.

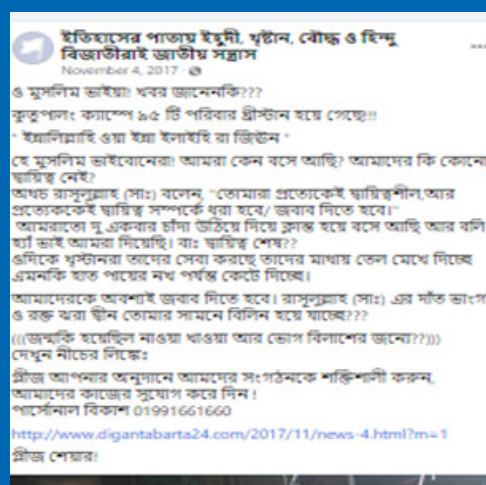


Supplementing this are narratives that exploit international crises, ranging from the Syrian Civil War to the plight of the Palestinians. In both victimhood narratives about Bangladesh and international crises, the narratives are structured to refer to the oppressed, the “oppressors” (usually framed as a homogeneous religious “other”), and to the solution (Islamism). The crisis in Syria, for example, is explained exclusively as persecution of Sunnis by Shi’a, inciting and entrenching sectarian hate, while the Rohingya crisis attests to Muslim persecution by Buddhists, Kashmir demonstrates persecution by Hindus, and the Israel-Palestine conflict is perceived as ongoing persecution by Jews. Victimhood narratives espoused online by extremists in Bangladesh are therefore rife with othering and framed explicitly in the context of religion, where religious “others” are scapegoated for perceived injustices against Islam and Muslims.

Case Study Two - “Non-Muslims are terrorising the world”

The title of this Facebook page reads “Jews, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus are Terrors in History”. It shares a news link from an external news portal with the title “95 families in Kutupalang [Rohingya refugee] Camp have been converted to Christianity”. The post calls for the Muslim community to take revenge for these alleged conversions and claims that **Islam is being vanished by “others”**.

In another post, this page claims that Muslims are not terrorists, and that non-Muslims (grouped again as a homogeneous “other”) are in fact terrorising the world.



Victimhood narratives at the individual level

ISD researchers also found victimhood narratives present at the individual level, where named figures are accused of attacking Islamic values if they steer away from narrow and singular extremist understandings of Islamic practice. Victimhood narratives at the individual level are tied in with *takfir*, the practice of excommunication. Cricketer Shakib al-Hasan and tech personality Ayman Sadiq are two recent, prominent examples. Al-Hasan was accused of being a non-believer and a traitor to Muslims after pictures of him at a Hindu ceremony in India surfaced online. This escalated to death threats, with one individual claiming al-Hasan “hurt Muslim sentiments,” and threatening to “cut him to pieces” for blasphemy on a Facebook live-stream.

Sadiq similarly received death threats and was targeted with hate speech online after a former employee of his posted a picture with a pride flag on his Facebook. Although this individual was based abroad at the time of the photo and no longer works for Sadiq, extremist groups capitalised on his affiliation with Dhaka-based Sadiq to claim that imported liberal values are eroding Islamic practice domestically. 10 Minute School, a virtual education platform founded by Sadiq, was accused of indoctrinating Bangladeshi youth with anti-Islamic values, while Sadiq himself received death threats.²¹ That Sadiq was targeted with death threats based solely on a loose affiliation with someone in another country that posted the pride flag is testament not only to how deeply embedded anti-LGBTQ sentiment is across the country, but also to how quickly Islamist extremists leverage this to: (a) attack individuals that do not uphold their own interpretation of Islamic practice; and (b) fear-monger

by framing this as an encroachment of foreign values and as persecution of domestic Islamic values. Further, despite CTTC involvement and the removal of the death threats against Sadiq, the surge in anti-LGBTQ content triggered by this remains online.²² This underscores broader concerns about the capacity of social media platforms to moderate effectively in non-English contexts and non-Romanised script.

Global and Local Islamic Heritage

Victimhood narratives are aided by selective retellings of Islamic history that focus primarily on conquest. This heritage-based content focuses almost exclusively on international history (e.g. Saladin, Umar al Khattab, etc.), with very little mention of Bangladesh or broader Bay of Bengal's rich Islamic history. Two key factors may explain this omission.

Firstly, Islamic history in the region is generally emblematic of pluralism and coexistence. The Bengal Sultanate was known for religious pluralism, for example, where non-Muslim and Muslim communities not only coexisted peacefully, but also ruled together.²³ This contradicts the "othering" narratives propagated by Islamists in Bangladesh, in which non-Muslim communities are demonised for their alleged oppression of Muslims (see "Victimhood Narratives") and Muslims are accused of disbelief when they engage with e.g. Hindus.

Secondly, Bangladesh's recent history, and critically its partition from Pakistan, may be ignored because Islamists at the time were vehemently opposed to independence, reminders of which may undermine their attempts to paint a nationalist discourse today. Where independence is mentioned, it is done strategically to enforce the notion of Islamic governance over secularism, by claiming independence was supposed to result in an Islamic, rather than secular, Bangladesh.

In addition to stories of conquest, ISD researchers came across historical narratives that enforce the notion of Islam as a cure for historic grievances and injustices, while positioning contemporary Islamist movements as the solution for today's injustices. For example, pre-Islamic Arabia, defined as corrupt and deviant, is compared domestically to Bangladesh's government and internationally to Western hegemony - just as the dawn of Islam "fixed" pre-Islamic Arabia, Islam (or Islamists) will fix deviance and corruption today.

Case Study Three demonstrates how Islamic history and heritage is exploited to present domestic extremist efforts as a continuation of the “revered” Islamic leadership of the past.

Case Study Three - Heritage-based narratives to add credibility to contemporary Islamism

A video of one of Hel’s leaders, Mamunul Haque, is shared by Mamunul Haque Supporters Group, a Facebook page with more than 223,000 members. In the video, Haque states Islam and its Islamic “heroes” of the past have fought against all ills in every era. After listing some of the key names in Islamic history, Haque goes on to say that the heritage of Islamic leadership will be carried forward until Judgement Day, placing contemporary Islamism (and by extension, Hel) in the same category as some of Islamic history’s most renowned leaders. The positive reactions on the post (over 2,200 responses, over 300 shares) indicate the appeal of this narrative.



In another speech also posted to this page, he compares himself to the Prophet Abraham and states he “does not fear jail” for fighting against the status quo.

Anti-Secularism and the Supremacy of Islamic Governance

Anti-government narratives present Islamism as a necessary alternative to the perceived inherent incompetence and corruption of secular rule. Past actions against Jel (e.g. the war crimes tribunal) are reformulated as apparent proof that the governing Awami League has a secret agenda to erode Islam. Anti-government narratives also tend to level an accusation of extremism at secular (perceived, therefore, as discriminatory and anti-Islamic) governments, co-opting the very notion of extremism itself. *Shari’ah* governance, by contrast, is represented as more accommodating to religious and ethnic minorities by virtue of the sanctity of Islamic legal code.

Anti-government narratives are also highly localised. Public service provision by local governments is compared unfavourably to the community works of Islamist groups locally. Grassroots work by Islamist groups is communicated as effective and compassionate Islamic leadership, in stark contrast to the alleged “unjust” and “immoral” secular leadership of local and national government. ISD research has found, for example, posts celebrating charitable community-based activities by Islam Andolan Bangladesh (IAB), an emerging Islamist party that seeks the implementation of Islamic governance in Bangladesh. In contrast, accompanying rhetoric presents the secular government as corrupt and lacking.

Finally, **gendered narratives** that claim only Islamic governance can truly emancipate women are also present. These are generally perpetuated by women’s branches of known groups, including Bangladeshi Islami Chatri Sanghsta, the female student wing of Jel, and

regional women's branches of Hezb-ut-Tawheed. The latter is particularly active in its discussion of the rights afforded to women through strict Islamic governance, arguing that "Allah is not only to be worshipped, He has to followed as the 'law giver' of human society".

COVID-19

In line with findings from [ISD research in other contexts](#), the social and economic fallout of the pandemic is also being exploited by extremists in Bangladesh. The type of content being pushed out by Islamist groups and pages include: (1) explanatory videos about the virus; (2) religious prophecies that predict the virus; (3) religious solutions to the virus (e.g. cures); (4) religious actions people should take as a response (e.g. wearing Niqab); and (5) explanations of the pandemic as a punishment aimed at minorities in the country and "disbelievers" from other countries (e.g. Indian Hindus). COVID-19 related content therefore also "others" and scapegoats on the basis of religion.

COVID-19 has also been leveraged to amplify anti-government narratives, with claims that the government is inept, and that Islamists will work hard in its stead to help the country through the pandemic. ISD researchers also found claims that the virus is caused by the absence of a caliphate, leveraging the virus to reinforce the narrative that Islamism – and specifically the reinstatement of a caliphate – is the solution to contemporary crises. This largely corresponds with international trends – ISD has previously identified similar exploitation of the pandemic, where extremist groups use it "to highlight perceived shortcomings of democratic states... instead emphasising the efficacy of an 'Islamic response'." ²⁴

Conclusion

Both the machine learning and manual digital analysis under this project have shed light on the scope and scale of online extremism in Bangladesh. This research highlights how extremist actors in Bangladesh consistently reformulate international and domestic events to present Islamism as the only solution to the frustrations and injustices of Muslims domestically and abroad. Extremist actors are adept at generating and propagating narratives that build traction to ultimately undermine and delegitimise the Bangladeshi state in order to present Islamism as the necessary (and sole) alternative to secular government and the ruling Awami League. Fear-mongering narratives that claim Islam is under attack by homogeneous, religious “others” across the world embed an “us-versus-them” mentality that dehumanises non-Muslims and ignores the pluralist history of the region. Narratives about the oppression of Islam today are contrasted with depictions of prosperity and conquest in selective retellings of Islamic history. Perhaps most pointedly, this research also reveals the very real potential for extremist rhetoric to escalate to death threats. Given online content has been affiliated with offline violence in Bangladesh in the past,²⁵ this research speaks to an urgent need for a response to extremist content that will mitigate the risks of future violence.

Further, ISD’s analysis of extremist content in Bangladesh reveals a notable absence of positive or alternative counter-voices that push back against the harmful narratives espoused – none of the posts analysed contained positive counter-messaging. While we recognise that this may be the result of intimidation, especially considering past violence against pro-secular voices, addressing extremism online by providing alternative narratives and counter-narratives is nonetheless key to effective P/CVE efforts. In addition, offline P/CVE efforts in Bangladesh have historically concentrated on Dhaka, which means there is a paucity of community-based initiatives in other areas of Bangladesh.²⁶

ISD’s research comes at a pivotal moment. The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent social restrictions are sending people online in greater numbers than ever before, while the economic fallout is likely to amplify local grievances and frustrations while government attention is dominated by the immediate public health response. Opportunistic extremist actors have and will continue to capitalise on the impact of the pandemic. Social restrictions, including on congregational prayers, are fodder for victimhood narratives that claim Islam is under threat. Altogether, COVID-19 opens a doorway for Islamist groups to position themselves as sympathisers of an aggrieved populace, speaking to the urgent need for appropriate responses to extremism online.

The key findings and recommendations of this report therefore offer a timely opportunity to renew dialogue with the Government of Bangladesh and a range of partners on addressing the challenge that online hate and extremism poses. In addition to the numerous policy and programming responses that could follow, of critical importance is the practical need

to include local governments in some of these conversations. With daily interface with the Bangladeshi populace, local governments have unique insight into how community dynamics shift from month to month. Were their remit on P/CVE to go further than awareness-raising and encompass a practical role in cooperation with a range of public services and civic stakeholders on a prevention agenda, and were they to be privy to a summary analysis of online trends and content, then there are real opportunities for sustainable, informed and targeted prevention.

Endnotes

- 1 Muggah, Robert. "The Radicalization of Bangladeshi Cyberspace," *Foreign Policy*, 11th May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/27/bangladesh-islamist-terrorist-networks-internet-extremism/>.
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