The Role of Civil Society in Countering Radicalization in Bangladesh
FOREWORD

Bangladesh has achieved considerable success in its efforts to address the issue of counter-terrorism. There is now a serious leadership crisis in most terrorist groups, thanks to the government's stern measures against terrorism. However, there is still the threat of increasing radicalization as more and more youth turn to radical activity. Contrary to the traditional notion that people from economically deprived backgrounds and of low education are more prone to radicalization, recent trends show that educated youth from affluent families are also engaging in such activities. This trend has given rise to a new phenomenon: a new generation of youth who are technologically literate and well-versed in social media application skills. They garner more support from like-minded individuals and groups in carrying out radical activities ranging from selection, indoctrination and recruitment, to training, financing, planning and execution of their programmes.

This new wave of radicalization has emerged in Bangladesh as a serious threat to the internal stability of society. In fact, Bangladesh is now witnessing the "second wave" of radicalization. The first wave occurred from 1999-2005, following the return of Afghan war veterans to Bangladesh. The second wave consists of new, technologically advanced militant radical groups such as Hizbul Tahrir (HT), Hizbut Tawhid and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). These proscribed groups are playing a pivotal role in propagating the 'global jihadist ideology in the local language.'

Among various actors that can play a crucial role in countering radicalization, we believe that the role played by civil society in the country has been and will continue to be of critical importance. Civil society in Bangladesh can reach segments of society that governments may have difficulty to engage to counter the process of radicalization; civil society also plays the role of detecting new trends in radicalization at an early stage. It contributes to the formulation of policy that deals with radicalization and militancy.
In view of the increasing influence and negative effects of these new trends in radical activism, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) has undertaken a comprehensive research project, with financial support from the Royal Danish Embassy in Bangladesh, to assess the threat emanating from radicalization. The project entitled "Towards Developing a Better Counter Terrorism Regime in Bangladesh: Phase II" will explore the growing threat of radicalization in Bangladesh and its contingent implication, and seek innovative solutions in addressing the issues posed by this phenomenon. The project will contribute to strengthening the counter-terrorism regime of Bangladesh by advocating the use of non-kinetic soft power means for countering radicalization.

I would like to place on record BEI's appreciation for the continued support it has received from the Royal Danish Embassy in Bangladesh in the second phase of the project. I would also like to thank the members of the Advisory Committee and my colleagues in BEI, for their contribution and commitment in producing this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report entitled “The Role of the Civil Society in Countering Radicalization in Bangladesh” is one of the deliverables of the project “Towards Developing a Better Counter Terrorism Regime in Bangladesh- Phase II”, being implemented by Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI). The report aims to explore the role of civil society in countering the phenomenon of radicalization in Bangladesh. A perception survey was conducted among civil society representatives in Dhaka City through administering structured questionnaire. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were also held with highly placed civil society representatives of Bangladesh. Furthermore, extensive literature review was undertaken to analyze the trends, incidents, prospects and challenges of the role of civil society in countering radicalization in Bangladesh.

The term “radical” does not have any negative connotation according to classic linguistic standards. However, currently in the context of Bangladesh, it is defined as a tendency to use a peculiar brand of religion, as justification for conquest and control over population and resources. Bangladesh has been witnessing a new wave of terrorism in the form of radicalization that includes extremist propaganda, fund raising, procuring supplies and dawaati activities of Islamist extremist outfits. According to the perception survey conducted by BEI, 74% of the respondents think that radicalization and extremism is on the rise in Bangladesh, whereas only 7% believe that the notion of radicalization is diminishing. There can be a number of causes that may lead to radicalization. The causes may vary from country to country. BEI's perception survey has indicated that 74% of the respondents consider economic disparity and deprivation the cause of radicalization in Bangladesh, along with other major reasons.

The report shows that radicals’ and extremists’ narratives in Bangladesh grossly misinterpreted religion and used it to appeal to people's 'soft corner.' The Islamist extremists aim to bring back the caliphate, with the primary objective of attaining state power. Thus ideological conviction is one of the main features of radicalization and extremism. From the perception survey it has been observed that Youth (86%) leads the chart as the most vulnerable section of the society to the appeal of radical organizations. Radical groups mainly exploit people's religious appeal. They create opportunities for their recruits through making use of the shortcomings of the state. The propaganda of the radicals are at present more organized and far more appealing to their targets, especially via the extensive use of the internet (social media platforms), along with the use of leaflets, bulletins, cell-phones and other traditional means of exploitation.

It has been seen that radicals and extremists, from time to time, take advantage of the civil society and CSOs due to the considerable influence and outreach they have on society. CSOs are also important to radical and extremist groups in financial terms, allowing them to channel funds. Yet, some participants suggested that these groups
cannot engage with CSOs openly, hence they separately produce dedicated workers to carry out their instructions without any question. Besides, 34% of the survey respondents think that Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and community section of the civil society is being widely used by the radicals and extremists. However, there exists an opinion within the civil society and CSOs that they are themselves very weak and fragmented in Bangladesh.

Even though there is a debate on the role of civil society in Bangladesh, there is no doubt that over the years, it has contributed in the development of this country. Though representatives of civil society have occasionally shown their concerns over the incidents related to radicalism and terrorism, measures taken so far by the civil society /CSOs in regard to counter radicalization in Bangladesh have proven to be low on effectiveness. From the perception survey it was also observed that a majority of the people (71%) think that the role of civil society has been underestimated and taken too lightly in regard to countering radicalization in Bangladesh.

In today’s world, civil society has emerged as an extremely effective tool of countering radicalization. The perception survey showed that the most effective way for the civil society to intervene in countering radicalization in Bangladesh is by reducing the appeal of extremist groups and their messages through improving religious/political education and organizing diversionary activities for young people (69%), among others.

There also exist a number of challenges in the process of engaging civil society effectively in countering radicalization in Bangladesh. According to BEI's survey, maintaining sustainability of an intervention by civil society (61%) came up as a major challenge that civil society faces in countering radicalization in Bangladesh, along with lack of safety and security (60%) and creating trust at the personal and institutional levels (57%).

In spite of the challenges, civil society has now become an essential player in countering radicalization and can deal with many of the underlying drivers of radicalization. The partnership between the state and civil society is imperative in addressing the problems of radicalization. It is time that the Government of Bangladesh recognized the crucial role that the civil society and CSOs could play in regard to countering radicalization and make contributions towards the efforts to prevent the threats of terrorism in Bangladesh.
SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The role of civil society has been redefined by globalization in the global governance system. It has a vital share in key political, economic, and societal issues. It is not anymore merely a non-governmental phenomenon that defines the scope and nature of civil society's significance. State structures and international development patterns are significant to demonstrate the revival of the state of the civil society and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Radicalization is an extensively talked about topic in the present time. It has emerged as one of the most dangerous threats to peace, security, development and civilization. It can be found almost everywhere in developing and developed societies. Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, has traditionally promoted an inclusive, tolerant and secular society since its independence. However, Bangladesh has also experienced an upsurge in support for Islamist violent extremism. An influx of already radicalized groups, such as returning veterans of the Afghan war and migrant workers from abroad, influenced public opinion, as did events on the world stage, particularly U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and events in Palestine that fuelled radicalism and anti-Western sentiment.¹

The different governments of Bangladesh have already shown zero tolerance on terrorism and have taken strong measures to combat the terrorists through various security sectors. Although success came in many cases in combating terrorism, the root causes of radicalization facilitating violence and steps to forestall the violent radicalization of groups and individuals in the society (counter-radicalization) have not been adequately addressed yet.

Traditionally, responses to terrorism in Bangladesh have been dominated by hard power approaches by the government and law enforcement agencies, but contemporary trends in security discourse have drawn attention to the potential role of the civil society as an effective tool of countering radicalization. This is drawn from the concept that civil society is playing an increasingly important role in national politics. The State alone does not

have all the resources necessary to counter radicalization and deal with violent extremism. As a result, governments need partners to carry out this task. Involving civil society and local communities can bring to bear a range of tools and resources not available to the government. Working with communities and civil society enhances trust and transparency and strengthens social cohesion. Civil society organizations can reach segments of society that governments may have difficulty to engage. They can help counter extremist ideologies and promote peaceful dialogue. Investing in contacts with local communities not only facilitates and accelerates the process of information gathering, but can also act as an early observation or recognition system of any violent extremist tendencies, hence permitting an early and effective counter-strategy.

Therefore, looking into the role of civil society and CSOs in countering radicalization in Bangladesh is a very judicious and sensible approach towards preventing the threat of terrorism.

1.2 Overview of the Project

Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) completed a 3-year project, entitled "Towards Developing a Better Counter Terrorism Regime in Bangladesh" in 2012, with financial support from the Royal Danish Embassy, Dhaka. The outcomes and recommendations of this project significantly contributed to a deeper understanding of the threats emanating from terrorism in Bangladesh. The research findings reveal that radicalization is a greater threat for Bangladesh in the long run that needs to be dealt with in proper manner.

Bangladesh has been witnessing a new wave of terrorism in the form of radicalization that includes extremist propaganda, fund raising, procuring supplies and daawati activities of Islamist terrorist outfits. This radicalization, often based on misinterpretation of the Scriptures of Islam, challenges the mainstream national narrative of Bangladesh which is an age-old happy blending of secular democracy and moderate practice of religion. The ideologies of these groups not only undermine the democratic system of governance, they also use perceived and real grievances of Bangladeshis regarding the country’s relationship with the West, socio-economic and political issues to lend legitimacy to their objectives. Alarmingly, the contemporary Islamist radical doctrines are targeting the middle class, educated and influential people including those in the public and private universities and professions. In fact, terrorist outfits have significantly
changed their strategy and tactics to carry out their activities in the face of strenuous pressure from the law enforcement agencies. The prime objective of their activities is to radicalize the Bangladeshi society to establish a theocratic regime based on the Shariah.

Before such radicalization transforms into militancy and violence, it is essential to contain and eventually eliminate the menace at the initial stage of the continuum. While kinetic measures against terrorism are an important first step in combating the challenge, prevention would be a preferred solution by addressing the problems of radicalization and recruitment. In doing this, interventions like the role of the media and civil society in countering terrorism, the role of education system in shaping youth perceptions against terrorist ideologies, choking off terrorist financing, assessing the impact of Bangladeshi diaspora on Islamist radicalization, and the building of a counter narrative are essential for addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of radicalization and terrorism in Bangladesh as well as the radicalization process itself, which have not been fully explored in the first phase of the project.

In view of the above, BEI has undertaken a second, 3-year phase of the project funded by the Royal Danish Embassy, Dhaka, in understanding the dynamics of the continuing radicalization, recruitment and related issues and exploring the ways and means of combating the challenge of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh.

1.3 Methodology

This report is based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of primary data (Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Perception Survey) and secondary data (literature review). The findings of the report are also based on quantitative as well as qualitative analysis of the data and information gathered by the below mentioned research instruments.

1.3.1 Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review has been undertaken to analyze the trends, incidents, prospects and challenges of the role of civil society in countering radicalization in Bangladesh. Salient literature includes international reports and publications, newspaper articles, scholarly journals and reports, policy papers, working papers, issue briefs, publications from specialized domestic research and
advocacy organizations, websites of international, and local civil society organizations, and various national and international policy documents of renowned research institutions from home and abroad.

1.3.2 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)
KIIs were held with ten highly placed civil society representatives who have worked extensively on radicalization, extremism, violence and terrorism to gain their valuable insights into the role of civil society in countering radicalization in Bangladesh. The key informants provided in-depth information, which is not available in the public domain. Such empirical inputs contributed significantly to the understanding of radicalization, and the existing and possible role of civil society in countering radicalization. Strict research ethics has been followed in collecting information to ensure utmost confidentiality of the interviewees.

1.3.3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
BEI has also conducted four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working in different segments of the society. First FGD was with the CSOs working on women and children rights; second FGD was with organizations focusing on governance and human rights issues; third FGD was organized with the youth organizations and the fourth FGD with the CSOs addressing the socio economic issues of the society. A holistic view in terms of possibilities and challenges of CSOs in working in the field of counter-radicalization in Bangladesh was obtained through these discussions.

1.3.4 Perception Survey
A perception survey was conducted by BEI through administering structured questionnaire among 70 civil society representatives in Dhaka City. The survey touched upon quite a few important issues like state of radicalization in Bangladesh, causes of radicalization, vulnerable sections of society, online radicalization, civil society’s engagement in countering radicals/extremists narratives, challenges faced by civil society, partnership between civil society and the Government and other interrelated issues.
1.4 Organization of the Report

The report starts with an introductory statement and is divided into sections that focus on specific subjects relating to the role of civil society in countering radicalization in Bangladesh. Subsequent to the first section, section II of the report presents radicalization and counter radicalization, highlighting the definitions of the terms, current state and causes of radicalization in Bangladesh. Section III explains the narratives of radical and extremist groups and their techniques/tools to spread those narratives in Bangladesh. Section IV shows how and why radical groups utilize or may engage civil society for radicalization in Bangladesh. The following section, section V focuses on the main thrust of the report, which is to present the role of the civil society in countering radicalization in Bangladesh. Then section VI points out the challenges that civil society faces in the existing socio-political structure. Section VII shows the importance of partnership between the Government and civil society in addressing the issue of counter radicalization. Then section VIII presents few recommendations to make civil society of Bangladesh more capable to counter the phenomenon of radicalization. And lastly, the report finishes of with concluding remarks on the role of civil society in countering radicalization in Bangladesh.
SECTION II:
RADICALIZATION AND COUNTER RADICALIZATION

2.1 Defining the terms- Radicalization; Counter Radicalization

Radicalization- There is no clear definition of radicalization. The term is used casually, and little has been done to systematically develop it into a conceptual tool through which to understand the process that may lead individuals to support violent extremism. Generally, it is widely referred to as a departure from normal social and political attitudes and behaviors. For the purpose of this report functional definition of radicalization is determined as:

"Radicalization is a process in which a person gets indoctrinated by others or self-motivation into a rigid ideology, religious or otherwise, equipped with a set of goals and plans that may eventually lead to extremism, militancy and terrorism aiming at national and/or international systemic change for governance and regulating human lives."  

In the absence of any widely recognized definition of radicalization in Bangladesh, the report aims to adopt the abovementioned definition for functional purpose.

Counter Radicalization- Similarly, the definition of counter-radicalization is also a bit imprecise. For the purpose of this report, the definition of the counter-radicalization is:

"Counter Radicalization is a package of social, political, legal, educational and economic programmes specifically designed to deter disaffected (and possibly already radicalized) individuals from crossing the line and becoming terrorists."  

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2 Quoted from a presentation, entitled "Countering Radicalization in Bangladesh", made by Mohammad Humayun Kabir at a Bangladesh-India Security Dialogue held in New Delhi on 3 April 2014.

2.2 Radicalization - A Bangladesh Perspective

Bangladesh has traditionally been an inclusive, secular and tolerant society. It has enjoyed positive relations between different communities even being a Muslim-majority country. Almost 90% of the population is Muslim and the remaining 10% is Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. Major religious festivals are marked by national holidays and celebrated in an atmosphere of tolerance, with the main religions sharing many rituals in common and receiving extensive media coverage. Therefore, Bangladesh has not experienced any major religious unrest and, historically, relatively few people have been attracted to any violent extremist ideology. This is despite Bangladesh's problems of widespread poverty, limited land and other resources, and areas of poor governance.

The trend of radicalization is not ancestral in Bangladesh. It can be referred to as a relatively recent phenomenon. Though, the leftist radicalization has existed in Bangladesh since the erstwhile East Pakistan, now it is almost decimated. Some of the well known left-wing parties were Purba Bangla Community Party (PBCP), Red Flag, Gono Mukti Fouz (GMF), Biplobi Community Party, Sarbahara Party, Janajuddho, Gono Bahini, etc. But these groups have diluted over time due to lack of popular support and marginalization.

However, from the beginning of the new millennium, Bangladesh has experienced an upsurge in support for Islamist violent extremism. An influx of already radicalized groups, such as returning veterans of the Afghan war and migrant workers from abroad, influenced public opinion. The brutality and atrocity against Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir and the other areas fuelled radicalism and contributed to the rise of extremism in Bangladesh. Gradually, the Islamist radicals and extremists have begun to come to the spot light by spreading training and radical ideologies to the society with the wish to establish Islamic rule or Shariah in Bangladesh.

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4 Sample Vital Registration Survey (SVRS), Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)
5 Report on "the Role of Media in Countering Radicalization in Bangladesh" by Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), 2014
The governments of Bangladesh have already shown zero tolerance on terrorism and have taken strong measures to combat the terrorists through various security sectors. Although success came in many cases in combating terrorism, success in disconcerting terrorist motivation, ideologies and networking still is a huge challenge for the entire country. According to the perception survey conducted by BEI, 74% of the respondents think that radicalization and extremism is on the rise in Bangladesh, whereas only 7% believe that the notion of radicalization is diminishing.

![Bar Graph](image)

**Figure 1: Perception Survey Statistics on Current State of Radicalization in Bangladesh**

Currently, few radical organizations have gained in strength and tried to come into the public spectrum. They have attracted public and media attention through their activities and propagation. Apart from the religion based terrorist organizations, few far left political extremists have made presence in the daily news as well. At present 13 terrorist organizations are operating actively and 29 others are operating covertly using fake credentials. The Special Branch of Bangladesh Police has provided the names of eight terrorist organizations to Home Ministry. These are: Ansarullah Bangla Team, Allah'r Dal, Islamic Solidarity Front, Tamiruddin Bangladesh, Tawhиде Trust, Hizbut-Tawhid, Shahdat-e-Nabuwat and Jamat-as-Sadat. A total of five terrorist organizations have been banned by the authorities so far and eight more are yet to be banned.

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7 Available at: http://www.samakal.net/2014/02/24/41872
8 Available at: http://www.samakal.net/2014/02/24/41872
religious groups for political interests of the mainstream parties; (X) Propaganda by radical organizations; (XI) Corruption and poor governance.

Besides, BEI’s perception survey shows that 74% of the respondents consider economic disparity and deprivation the cause of radicalization in Bangladesh.

Following that lack of good governance and social justice (73%), absence of rule of law (70%), difference and disagreement between leading political parties (69%), political violence (66%), unemployment (67%), propaganda by radical organizations and corruption (64%) also turned out to be some of the major causes of radicalization in Bangladesh among others.
3.1 Main Features of the Radicals' and Extremists' Narratives in Bangladesh

Radicals' and extremists' narratives in Bangladesh grossly misinterpret religion and use it to appeal to people's 'soft corner.' The propaganda is faith-driven and spread through exploitation of the religious sentiment of the masses. Radicals' and extremists' narratives preach that all other interpretations of Islam are false, and try to feed in the idea that their way of Islam is the 'purest form' and the 'only way of Islam.' The Islamist extremists aim to bring back the caliphate, with the primary objective of attaining state power. Thus ideological conviction is one of the main features of radicalization and extremism. Their agenda involves establishing an Islamic state to be run on the basis of the Shariah. Thus, the narratives are propagated to attain political objectives by capitalizing the internal problems of the state. Some participants also postulated that the extremists turned towards violent means to secure and achieve their objectives.

In Bangladesh, the extremists target the vulnerable groups starting from madrassa students to private university students to poverty stricken individuals to elite section of the society. Individuals who are frustrated with the government and its corrupt practices, along with inadequate levels of peace, dignity and economic benefits, are most vulnerable to fall prey to extremist ideologies. Furthermore, extremist groups take advantage of low levels of literacy rates and high levels of poverty prevalent in our society. It becomes very easy to motivate and indoctrinate people with little or no education, in the name of religion. Extremist groups take advantage of the gap in knowledge of Islam among the masses of people. They prepare distorted interpretation of Quranic verses that serve their purpose of spreading radicalization and extremism in the society. People have a tendency to get influenced by these distorted Islamist narratives as there prevails inadequate knowledge about their own religion.
From the perception survey it has been observed that Youth (86%) leads the chart as most vulnerable section of the society to the appeal of radical organizations, followed by people with less/poor/inadequate knowledge and understanding of Islam (64%) and madrassa students (57%).

### 3.2 Types of Techniques/Tools used by the Radicals and Extremists to Spread Narratives

Radical groups mainly exploit people’s religious appeal. They create opportunities for their recruits through making use of the shortcomings of the state. They also use mainstream media and social media to spread their narratives, along with traditional means of exploitation: where certain mosques are chosen by the radicals as a hub to
collect and recruit their targets, in addition to being utilized as religious educational institutions. Charismatic religious leaders are also used to spread the extremist propaganda. Furthermore, cadre-based political organizations, religious seminars, gatherings, etc. are also frequently used to spread their propaganda. Various forms of incentives are also used to attract people, such as financial incentive, which is evidently a very effective means of attracting people in a country where poverty levels are very high. The radical groups also have considerable influence on coaching centers, hostels, etc., where they provided financial assistance to the youth in order to appeal to them and recruit them. Radical groups have already developed a strong financial base and they use this to attract more targets. The concept of fear and rewards in the afterlife are also taken advantage of in order to pursue people into accepting their radical ideologies.

Furthermore, the Wahhabi idea has been used as an important tool, and has been advertised as being the purest form of Islam—thus, using ideological tools along with political tools.

Some radical groups have even taken the professional groups such as teachers, under their wings and used them to preach their ideology indirectly at educational institutions. The aim behind this strategy is to shape the young fragile minds to make them work for and support their activities.

Radical and extremist organizations also heavily recruit women and the youth: segments of the population who generally lack economic and social independence. Moreover, radical groups provide financial support and various types of training to the potential candidates for sustained periods of time in order to build trustworthy relationships with them, and later employ them to preach their narratives. The women are assigned to perform door-to-door visits, as they have easier access and could change the mindsets of other women with more efficacy than their male counterparts.

Furthermore, radical and extremist groups seek out very bright students from schools and universities who are not financially very sound and motivate them with job security and financial stability. Out of these students, a lot of them get attached to these radical groups and spread radical ideologies to their surroundings. Besides, these groups try to target any big gathering where they can find groups to talk to and spread their ideas.
On the other hand, leaflets, books, journals, and social media are also used to preach radical messages. Portrayals of suffering in the Islamic world, such as the tragedies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, among others, were also exploited in order to garner support.

At present the radical groups have chosen the virtual means, particularly Facebook and YouTube, to spread radical preaching as these are safer and the possibility of their getting tracked and caught by the law enforcers is lower. Moreover, a larger target can be reached using fewer resources, less time and less energy when these techniques of online radicalization are adopted by the mainstream radicals. Now the door-to-door propaganda is not the sole method for reaching and spreading narratives. The radicals are always updating their strategies and tactics as technologies tend to improve day by day. It is also believed that the propaganda of the radicals are at present more organized, and far more appealing to their targets, especially via the extensive use of the internet (social media platforms), along with the use of leaflets, bulletins, cellphones, personal communication, and distorted interpretations of Islam taught in mosques, etc. Loudspeakers of the mosques were also used to spread propaganda in certain parts of the country.
SECTION IV:
HOW AND WHY RADICALS/EXTREMISTS UTILIZE CIVIL SOCIETY/CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS) FOR RADICALIZATION IN BANGLADESH

There exists a view that radicals and extremists take advantage of the CSOs due to the considerable influence and outreach these organizations have on society. The radical groups require financial and other forms of support and resources from the mainstream society and leveraging CSOs, particularly grass roots level CSOs, seemed to be the best way to achieve the objectives of such groups.

Figure 4: Perception Survey Statistics on Do Radicals' take advantage of Civil society/CSOs or not

From the survey statistics it can be seen that more than half of the respondents (53%) think, radicals and extremists utilize civil society for spreading their radical activities (see Fig. 4). Furthermore, 34% of the survey respondents think that NGO and community section of the civil society is being widely used by the radical and extremist groups, followed by professional groups (29%), social workers (20%) and media (19%) (see Fig.5).
Additionally, another phenomenon persists where extremist groups align their ideologies with some of the CSOs to achieve their goals, such as intruding into CSOs in the form of service providing organizations like diagnostic centers, hospitals, banks, educational institutions, etc. In addition to that there are many CSOs that receive direct funding in the name of social advancement, but engage in the work of spreading radical narratives. There are also some universities where students are getting scholarships from those funds. They take advantage of the socio-economic situation where poverty is a significant problem and of the state’s inability in utility delivery system. The state is not capable of taking care of everybody and everyone. So the radical groups, as civil society, fill in this vacuum and provide the underprivileged population with all their necessary amenities, through which they buy-in their commitment on working for them and cultivate their ideology.

Generally, Bangladesh society’s inherent quality is tolerant and non-violent. Perhaps that is the reason the radical and extremist groups have not yet been highly successful in achieving their goals in Bangladesh, unlike many other countries in the world. For this reason such groups take advantage of a lack of social safety nets by ensuring people's immediate gains from their sources. Some CSOs and NGOs are directly and indirectly funded by radical organizations. It is also true that there are some NGOs that are taking funds in the name of madrassas, mosques, schools, etc. but in reality they are carrying out training and advocacy to spread radical messages. It was also observed that radicals

![Figure 5: Perception Survey Statistics on Segment of the Civil society is being widely used by Radicals/Extremists](image-url)
and extremists collect funds from expatriates in the name of religion to build mosques, etc., from where a substantial portion was being used to fund terrorist and extremist activities.

Yet, to many others, very few CSOs have relations with radical organizations, and believe that most CSOs in Bangladesh are free of radicalism or extremism and are not being used by the radical groups. To them, radical organizations utilize their own society through which they perpetrated their action and produce dedicated workers who carry out their orders without question, rather than using civil society. However, there exists a concern within the civil society and CSOs that they are themselves very weak and fragmented and thus extremist groups are hardly able to use civil society in Bangladesh.
5.1 Defining the term - Civil Society

Civil society is seen as a social sphere separate from both the state and the market. The increasingly accepted understanding of the term Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is that of non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary organizations formed by people in that social sphere. This term is used to describe a wide range of organizations, networks, associations, groups and movements that are independent from government and that sometimes come together to advance their common interests through collective action. Traditionally, civil society includes all organizations that occupy the 'social space' between the family and the state, excluding political parties. Some definitions of civil society also include certain businesses, such as the media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private schools, and for-profit associations, while others exclude them. In this report, civil society has been seen in a larger extent where media and NGOs are also taken as parts of the civil society in Bangladesh.

5.2 Civil Society- A Bangladesh Perspective

Civil society tends to play a major role in contributing to the creation of a healthy public life. Bangladesh civil society activists make a network of autonomous associations of rights-bearing and responsibility-laden citizens created voluntarily to address common problems, advance shared interests, and promote collective aspirations. Civil society participates alongside state and market institutions in the shaping and implementing public policies designed to resolve collective problems and promote public good.

Historically, civil society has played a strategic role in strengthening the process of democratization. The substantial beginning was in 1952 when the students and cultural activists protested against the cultural domination of the then Pakistani ruling class and shed blood for making Bangla one of the national languages. The seed for an independent Bangladesh was sown in this phase of nationalist movement leading to the democratic struggles for autonomy and finally independence. Over the years, civil society and its associations have contributed to the path of development of Bangladesh.

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9 Collected from Banglapedia www.banglapedia.org/
10 Rahman, A., "NGOs and Civil Society in Bangladesh", Bangladesh Online research Network.
However, seeking government cooperation is a local reality. In Bangladesh, external and local resources are directly or indirectly controlled by the government, and hence official cooperation is looked at by civil society in Bangladesh as a basic necessity, a feature that goes counter to the spirit of world civil society movement.

Political scientists believe that at this time Bangladesh civil society does not share much of the spirit of the global civil society in the sense that a lot of civil society associations and organizations in Bangladesh are seen to have been playing political role in collaboration with one or another national political party. In spite of this drawback, Bangladesh civil society is playing important role in promoting the rights and welfare of the people.

5.3 The Role of Civil Society in Countering Radicalization in Bangladesh

This report mainly focuses on the role of civil society in countering radicalization in Bangladesh.

Even though there is a debate on the role of civil society in Bangladesh, there is no doubt that over the years they have contributed in the development of this country. Bangladesh has become a vibrant country with the participation of various institutions in its development paradigm and governance structure. The involvement of non-state actors in parallel to the state institutions is considered the feasible means of development. Unfortunately, very less effective measures have been taken so far by the civil society/CSOs in regard to counter radicalization in Bangladesh. Though representatives of civil society have shown their concerns time to time over the incidents related to radicalism and terrorism and have penned articles in several dailies, appeared on talk shows and discussion on several media houses, and expressed concern publicly. In addition to that, the main theme of this year's international mother language day celebration was circulated around prevention of radicalism\(^\text{11}\).

From the perception survey it was observed that a majority of the people (71%) think that the role of civil society has been underestimated and taken too lightly for countering radicalization in Bangladesh. And within this population 50% of them think, the reason for underestimating them is due to the lack of strategic communication between civil society and the Bangladesh government.

\(^{11}\) Available at: http://www.samakal.net/2014/02/22/41425
A good number of people also think that there is a reluctancy on the government’s side to engage civil society (43%), lack of unity among CSOs (39%) and reluctancy of civil society in addressing the issue of radicalization (34%) are also the reasons for undervaluing the strengths of civil society and CSOs in order to counter radicalization in Bangladesh.

Figure 6: Perception Survey Statistics on Underestimating the Role of Civil Society in Bangladesh

Figure 7: Perception Survey Statistics on Reasons for underestimating the Role of Civil Society
Nowadays, civil society has emerged as an extremely effective tool of countering radicalization worldwide. Hence, the role of the civil society and its contribution to this process needs to be explored more seriously in Bangladesh. There are a number of ways in which civil society/CSOs of Bangladesh can play a powerful and efficient role in countering radicalization.

Civil society can deal with the underlying economic, social and political drivers of radicalization, deemed to be hunger, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, poor education, political/democratic unrest, corruption and exploitation by 'mobilizing and awakening' people regarding these issues. Civil society needs to create awareness, establish mechanisms of check and balance, support democratic institutions, and perform advocacy works (through advocacy campaigns, meetings, cultural events, etc.). Moreover, civil society can work towards improving education for the masses; influencing the state to adopt neutral, humanitarian, welfare based orientation; starting and facilitating social and cultural movements; implementing youth-driven social mobility and change programs; and providing skill development training in order to garnish employment skills and opportunities. Besides, civil society can increase greater participation and sense of empowerment of the masses by arranging dialogues, discussion forums, campaigns, using social media platforms.

Civil society has an enormous role to play in terms of preparing and disseminating counter narratives and messages. It can defy the extremist narrative and put forward positive alternatives. CSOs can promote accurate interpretation of Islam, which has greater accommodation for diverse viewpoints and organize programs with eminent Islamic scholars and religious leaders in order to spread a pacifist interpretation of Islam as opposed to political Islam. CSOs have a greater reach and acceptance among the people. Thus, they can successfully communicate and spread the counter narrative to that of the radical groups by mobilizing the youth in this regard; conducting social campaigns; and organizing various socio-cultural activities to counter extremist/radical narratives.

CSOs could also implement awareness-raising campaigns to counter the radical narratives and messages, and arrange advocacy campaigns and dialogue to counter radical ideologies/ideas. It is also extremely important for CSOs to select people who had a certain level of trust and popularity among the people in order to effectively disseminate the counter narratives. Academics or religious leaders could deliver
messages from the Quranic perspective in order to refute extremist narratives. Moreover, in order to reduce the gap between mainstream/traditional interpretation of Islam and extremist/radical narratives, CSOs could collaborate with Ulemas who are quite knowledgeable when it comes to the Quran and Sunnah, to disseminate the true understanding and interpretation of Islam.

In addition to that, CSOs working on security issues can spread their messages alongside their traditional activities. The proper explanations of religion can be prepared as booklets, books, leaflets, posters, CDs and can be disseminated by the CSOs to the masses. CSOs could therefore play a pivotal role in countering the ideological aspect of radical narratives. It was also important to pursue the government and CSOs to work together in this regard.

Also from the perception survey, it can be sensed that the most effective way for the civil society to intervene in countering radicalization is by reducing the appeal of extremist groups and their messages through improving religious/political education and organizing diversionary activities for young people (69%) among others.

![Figure 8: Perception Survey Statistics on Most effective way for the Civil Society to intervene in countering radicalization in Bangladesh](imageurl)
Civil society can play a significant role for building interfaith and communal harmony among the public. CSOs can arrange inter-faith dialogues at regular intervals as part of their activities to create a healthy atmosphere that aims to promote respect, heterogeneity, diversity and tolerance among different faiths. In addition to that, CSOs can facilitate national level interactions among the eminent religious leaders, which would let people think about the ideologies spread by the extremists more critically and objectively. CSOs can arrange and facilitate dialogues among the stakeholders to popularize counter-narratives and counter radicalization efforts. In order to get a greater reach, these sort of inter-faith dialogues and debates can be telecast by different television channels and broadcast by radio stations. Regular columns on those topics can be written in daily newspapers. CSOs can also do advocacy works in partnership with the government in order to create public spaces to facilitate and arrange dialogues that would promote inter-faith and communal harmony.

Furthermore, civil society can work towards promoting and strengthening democratic practices in different institutions, promoting non-communal ties via the media, introducing good citizenship programs, promoting youth leadership, and ensuring minority rights for countering radicalization in Bangladesh.

Another important element is that civil society can provide constructive and relevant points /solutions/ suggestions to the policy making authorities. In the socio-political context of Bangladesh, major steps taken in countering radicalization are mostly government centric. So, CSOs need to contribute at the policy making level to bring in any positive change in the process of countering radicalization in Bangladesh.

Finally, according to BEI's perception survey, an overwhelming percentage of people think that civil society and CSOs can facilitate dialogues, discussion forums, campaigns on the issue of counter radicalization (67%), followed by programs to improve religious and political education (66%), promote female empowerment and leadership to young people (57%) among others initiatives in order to counter the phenomenon of radicalization in Bangladesh.
Figure 9: Perception Survey Statistics on Activities/projects Civil Society can carry out in countering radicalization (%)
SECTION VI: CHALLENGES TO CIVIL SOCIETY IN COUNTERING RADICALIZATION IN BANGLADESH

In the previous section a good deal has been written about the role of civil society in countering radicalization, as it has become an accepted part of public policy responses to radicalization. Drawing on primary and secondary information and data, it is possible to identify a number of challenges in the process of engaging civil society effectively in countering radicalization in Bangladesh.

Maintaining the credibility of civil society was generally agreed to be an important consideration in Bangladesh. CSOs are not independent of the political processes or excluded from the political realm. The political entanglement has undermined the credibility of the CSOs to act on several crises. Moreover, the involvement of CSOs in mainstream political and financial spectrum has opened a portal for the Radicals/Extremists/Terrorists groups to exploit CSOs for attaining sectarian gains. When any individual or organization has been found to have political affiliation, people then generally start to doubt their acceptance, impartiality and credibility. Several participants pointed out that people in the country are sensitive to CSOs thought to be funded by international donors, especially since local CSOs sometimes appear to be more accountable to foreign donors than to the local communities they aim to assist. Consequently, civil society organizations should act democratically and transparently to ensure that they have the trust and respect of the people.

In Bangladesh, CSOs are fragmented and politically polarized. There is a huge dearth of coordination and harmonization among CSOs working on different issues throughout the country. As a result, it can be difficult to add value to the policy-making process by giving collective and constructive inputs to the concerned authority. Thus, there needs to be a genuine effort to bring together all the existing CSOs and build up coordination and communication among them for addressing crucial and critical social issues like radicalization and extremism in the country.

There exists a huge risk in undertaking any activities directly for countering radicalization for CSOs/NGOs working in the fields of human rights, development, education, etc. Some of the CSOs have categorically agreed that labeling any activity as
counter-radicalization will be very detrimental for them and their institutions, as there are high chances of closing down their work in some of the places by radicals and extremists. CSOs/NGOs, that took some initiatives to address the issue of radicalization, received life threats and encountered physical and mental harassment from radicals and radical organizations. Hence, a great deal of fear and insecurity prevails in tackling the issue of radicalization across different sections of civil society in Bangladesh. As a result, it has been suggested that there needs to be separate civil society organizations dealing with radicalization through academic research and other awareness activities.

There is a lack of autonomy and 'space' on the part of civil society to operate effectively given that the political parties were the 'main actors of power play.' It was suggested that a more neutral stance on the part of the government, and attempts to stay neutral, ensure transparency, and show genuine effort in partnering with civil society would give more mileage in terms of 'efficiency and value addition.'

There must be commitment on all the sides to make the efforts work against radicalization. When one of the sides is unwilling or doubtful of the merits of working collectively, this becomes all useless and ineffective. Unfortunately, here the state sometimes sees civil society and CSOs as their 'opponents' and try not to take them very seriously. To resolve this phenomenon government requires to take significant shifts in thinking and practice; at the same time CSOs need to make them relevant in addressing the issue of counter radicalization and come up with constructive and functional inputs.

The sustainability of an intervention is very crucial. Often CSO projects are limited in what they can achieve because of lack of enough funding. So any activity against radicalization needs to be long-term. With short term and sporadic efforts CSOs would not be able to make any difference in this space of countering radicalization.

Lastly, from the perception survey it can be seen that maintaining sustainability of an intervention (61%) came up as the major challenge that civil society faces in countering radicalization in Bangladesh, along with lack of safety and security (60%) and creating trust at the personal and institutional levels (57%).
Figure 10: Perception Survey Statistics on Challenges Civil Society faces or may face in countering radicalization

- Others: 7%
- Lack of knowledge and skills: 41%
- Lack of safety and security: 60%
- Lack of national consensus: 46%
- Building strategic communication: 49%
- Maintaining sustainability of an intervention: 61%
- Creating trust at the personal and institutional level: 57%

Figure 10: Perception Survey Statistics on Challenges Civil Society faces or may face in countering radicalization
SECTION VII: PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN COUNTERING RADICALIZATION/EXTREMISM

It was evident from the primary responses that the civil society and CSOs partnership with the Government is currently reasonably poor (see fig. 10), while some claimed that there was virtually no partnership between them regarding countering radicalization/extremism.

The government often plays a unilateral role and alienates CSOs. It was evident that there remains a pressing need for the state to understand the potential of the CSOs and facilitate them in tackling the threats of radicalization. The CSOs also expressed their desires to be given ‘more room to operate more effectively’ and be recognized as an important stakeholder in curbing the threats of radicalization. The lack of public-private partnership efforts in regard to this issue came up as a major difficulty from the primary responses.

It was suggested by some civil society representatives that the government could revamp institutions such as The Islamic Foundation, and start grand programs catering to devising and tackling radicalism in the country. Providing incentives to the Imams could potentially make them more enthusiastic in matters of countering radicalization.

On the other hand, a number of people have shared that there are some people connected with Islamist radical groups within the government who often tried to influence public programs and policies to fulfill their aims.
This report has indicated the significance of civil society engagement in countering radicalization in Bangladesh. Civil society has now become an essential player in counter-radicalization and its contribution is imperative because it can deal with many of the underlying drivers of radicalization, takes on the narratives and messages of extremists, and is well placed to spot the early signs of vulnerability. It is also extremely important that the Government of Bangladesh recognizes the indispensable role that the civil society and CSOs can play with regard to countering radicalization and take steps to enhance their contribution along with developing a national counter radicalization policy to create a safe and stable Bangladesh.

Civil society should be allowed to survive and play its due role. CSOs could help in creating and sustaining civic spaces. The partnership between the state and CSOs are imperative in addressing the problems of radicalization, and so is the partnership between CSOs and the media.

Economic and political stability is also necessary to counter radicalization, along with overall socioeconomic improvement in the country.

The youth needs to be trained to engage in different socio-cultural activities that could raise awareness through cultural festivals, dramas, plays, leadership dialogue, etc. to counter radicalization among the general masses.

Other recommendations from primary responses include:

- Shifting from donor dependence to objective work since many radical operatives or agents are operating within the donor organizations.
- Joining with the global civil society movement and pushing the government to take stern steps against radicalization.
- Adopting reforms in the education system, particularly with regard to madrassa education.
- Encouraging Bangladeshi culture and traditions.
- Reducing the economic gap, ensuring economic prosperity, social justice, etc., are also crucial to counter radicalization.