

Bangladesh: Crisis of Identity, Consolidation of Power

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Ongoing struggles over Muslim vs. Bengali identities pave the way for authoritarianism in Bangladesh

In the latest iteration of the Bengali vs Muslim identity debate, a Supreme Court lawyer served a legal notice on April 9, 2023 to Bangladeshi authorities to prohibit the Mongol Shobhajatra - the iconic procession for Bengali New Year (Noboborsho) - from taking place as part of the celebrations on April 14. The prohibition was requested on the grounds that it hurts religious sentiments and is not related to Bangladeshi culture. The question of whether one is primarily a Bengali or a Muslim has been at the forefront of cultural and political battles in Bangladeshi society, often manifesting in violent outbursts of an identity crisis. Islamists, especially hardliners, have frequently directed violence towards Bengali cultural programs, such as the *Noboborsho* celebrations, with few legal resolutions. The case of the 2001 Ramna Botomul bomb attack, which started a chain of Islamist violence in Bangladesh that decade, remains stuck in the courts.

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Liberals have long sought to resolve this identity crisis by demanding that Bangladesh no longer have Islam as its state religion. The demand was recently revived in the aftermath of the 2021 attacks on minority Hindus during their *Durga Puja* celebrations. If the Awami League (AL) government, in power since 2008 elections, had conceded to this demand, it would have been an auspicious time considering that it would have coincided with the 50th anniversary of the nation and the 100th birthday of Sheikh Mujib, the Father of the Nation and founder of “Mujibism” (a populism centered on secularism, nationalism, democracy and socialism). However, as it currently stands, secularism co-exists alongside Islam as the state religion, providing no syncretic resolution to the identity crisis.

The current administration is very unlikely to alter this, especially when one considers the status of Islam in Bangladesh as a political and cultural force. Since liberation, military rulers have used Islam to legitimize their regimes, as have political parties to shore up support for anti-government movements. A confluence of factors - global and domestic - further entrenched Islamists as a coercive social force and significant political constituency. These include the return of Bangladeshis who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the import of a hardline Wahhabi/Salafi strain of Islam from the Middle East (whether through migrant labor or funding for religious schools and Islamist organizations), 9/11 and the launch of global War on Terror, and the consequent rise of Islamophobia worldwide and reactionary Islamic populism. The latter phenomena, beginning with 9/11, shaped the sort of authoritarian state we see today in Bangladesh.

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Political and communal violence against religious minorities, coupled with the launch of the global War on Terror in the early 2000s, provided the Bangladesh government, led by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB), cover for unleashing the state security apparatus on suspected Islamist militants. The repressive Operation Clean Heart, which granted the military full indemnity for their actions, was lauded by secular liberals despite the warning signs that such actions would also be taken against dissenters, which ultimately came to be true. Interestingly, the fact that the major Islamist political party, JIB, was part of the ruling alliance meant that the actions of their cadres and allies were ignored or excused.

The succeeding AL government of Sheikh Hasina (Sheikh Mujib’s daughter) has continued this repressive approach. Whenever the Islamists have directly challenged the government’s authority, the latter have responded with media blackouts, violent repression, and extrajudicial killings. But the government has also changed tack. Anti-imperialist sentiments following the two decades long War on Terror, the blatant Islamophobia in the West, increasing tensions between India over borders and resource sharing, and the Rohingya Crisis – all have fueled a rise in an Islamic populism that the increasingly authoritarian government of Sheikh Hasina has deftly used to its advantage to consolidate its power. A prime example of the government currying to Islamic populism is the draconian Digital Security Act, enacted in 2018, which can punish anyone who hurts religious sentiment. The Act has provided cover for the ruling party to imprison dissenters, journalists, and activists of all stripes, while creating accommodations for Islamists who have advocated for a blasphemy law in the nation.

It is within this context that secularism as a proclamation is rendered impotent, regardless of its restoration in the constitution. In order to create a viable alternative for religious tolerance in contemporary Bangladeshi society, we need to examine the identity crisis that has plagued the region ever since the 1947 Partition.

Secularism in Theory and Practice

A brief analysis of Bangladesh’s modern history reveals that the contradiction between the Bengali and Muslim identities were present before 1947. In the East Bengal region, which consisted primarily of ethnic Bengalis, the feudal landlords were primarily Hindu whereas the sharecroppers and peasantry were largely Muslim. The continued oppression of the peasantry resulted in mass support among Muslims in East Bengal for a majoritarian Muslim state, as promoted by Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

However, the two-state solution that resulted in the formation of two Pakistans, with East Pakistan acting as an internal colony to West Pakistan, intensified attachments to a Bengali identity over a Muslim one. The Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan were getting short-changed via uneven economic development compared to their fellow Muslims of other ethnicities in West Pakistan. There was widespread belief among West Pakistanis that Bengali Muslims were “lesser” given their geographical and social overlap with Hindus in the Bengal region.

Interestingly, it was the progressive Islamist organization Tamuddun Majlish who agitated against the Muslim League government at the time, especially among the rural population. This agitation came together with the more urban middle-class opposition to Jinnah’s declaration of Urdu as the national language, culminating in the demand for East Pakistan’s independence, advanced by the Awami League from 1966 with its six-point program. At least initially, the independence movement framed itself as an expression of a Muslim Bengali people.

To delegitimize the independence movement, the ruling Pakistani regime labeled Bengali freedom fighters as anti-Islamic. This weaponization of Islam led the liberation movement to increasingly center secularism in its imaginary. With the pro- and anti-liberation forces seemingly divided into secular versus Islamic camps respectively, secularism became a foundational pillar for Bangladesh's first constitution in 1972. But it took the form of *dharmaniropekkhota* (religious neutrality), which accorded all religions equal rights. Sheikh Mujib described *dharmaniropekkhota* this way: "I also believe that all the religions that exist in Bangladesh should have equal rights. By this I mean secularism, the right to profess one's faith." Mujib also insisted that his idea of secularism "does not mean the absence of religion."

While Mujib's secularism afforded a veneer of communal harmony, it was applied in a top-down manner without democratic participation. It ignored the centuries-long syncretism of Islam with Bengali culture in the region, as well as the fact that Bangladesh was predominantly Muslim.

However, the Mujib government's secular tolerance for various religions was paradoxical. While state-controlled media aired recitals from the texts of various religions, the Mujib government also embedded Islam as the hegemonic religion in Bangladeshi society. As political scientist Ali Riaz has detailed in his book *God Willing*, the Mujib government funded the expansion of Islamic schools in 1973 and the construction of the Islamic Development bank in 1974.

Subsequent military governments built on the social hegemony of Islam, removing even the veneer of secularism to espouse a Bangladeshi Muslim nationalism. In 1977, the military government of Ziaur Rahman removed secularism from the country's constitution. Ziaur Rahman also oversaw key changes in the political landscape of Bangladesh that resulted in the legitimacy of political Islam in the country, starting with the promulgation of Political Parties Regulation in 1976. These changes included the repatriation of Rajakars (collaborators of the Pakistani army in 1971), the renaming of citizens from Bengalis to Bangladeshis in the constitution in 1978, the lifting of the ban on religious political parties, and a confrontational stance with India, especially over border issues. Later in 1988, the government of H.M. Ershad would build on its predecessor to codify Islam as a state religion. Thus from the late 70s onwards, political Islam resurged in Bangladesh in various permutations of parties and coalitions.

A Politics of Expediency: Past & Present

When JIB returned to Bangladeshi politics in 1976, they formed a coalition with the Islamic Democratic League and other Islamic parties. Riaz details the exponential growth of JIB: in 1979, they won 750,000 of the total votes and by 1986, the number had gone up to 1.3 million. In terms of representation, JIB went on to win 10 out of 300 seats in 1986 and would expand to 18 out of 300 seats in the 1991 elections. The 1991 elections elevated JIB to the role of kingmaker as it became the fourth largest political party and both BNP and AL vied to form coalitions with it. In the end, BNP (led by Ziaur Rahman's widow Khaleda Zia) formed the ruling alliance with JIB. Once the Islamists became part of the ruling coalition, it signaled that political Islam was here to stay in Bangladesh. The next two decades saw a flourishing of Islamist political organizations, some of which were of the extremist variant.

The AL, which vowed never to side with Islamists and usually enjoyed the support of religious minorities, found themselves in a pinch. To win back power, they could not ignore JIB's significant influence in certain districts. JIB's honeymoon with BNP ended when the latter refused to proactively support the right to citizenship of Golam Azam, the leader of the Rajakars who had been stripped of his citizenship in 1972 for collaborating with the Pakistani army during the liberation war. JIB started publicly opposing the BNP, especially when the government allowed Golam Azam to be tried by a People's Court in 1992 and moved to do the same in the judiciary. AL took the

opportunity to build a coalition with JIB, and came to power in 1996. The need to secure the rural vote made JIB indispensable to both AL and BNP, with this back and forth passing of power between the two parties ultimately serving to further JIB's cause. It should be noted that while JIB became the prominent face of political Islam in Bangladesh, several other Islamist political parties continued to exist in alliance with each other and/or in coalition with AL or BNP.

This politics of expediency eventually emboldened Al-Qaeda style Islamic extremists, such as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team, who conducted a series of public attacks on Bengali cultural festivals, intellectuals, bloggers, writers and events organized by NGOs in the 2000s. With the War on Terror in full swing at that time, it became incumbent on the Bangladesh government to quell such religious extremism, which they did by increasing state repression and providing indemnity to the state's tools of oppression, old and new. Both BNP and AL-led governments expanded the extrajudicial powers of the paramilitary group Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), strengthened the military and, per a 2007 Congressional report, agreed to provide the US territorial support to conduct counter-terrorism efforts. Ironically, the strengthened military staged a bloodless coup in 2007, implicitly supported by the UN, and installed a Bangladeshi former World Bank official as the Chief Advisor of the caretaker government. The volatile political situation provided cover for the coup. The citizens of Bangladesh, suffering from the impunity and corruption of both the major political parties, mistakenly assumed it to be a respite.

The quasi-military rule didn't last long. In 2008, AL took over power by winning a two-thirds majority in parliament, without the support of JIB. With JIB's political power waning, AL instead allied itself with smaller Islamist parties such as Khelafat Majlish. AL has remained in power since then, largely through a confluence of actively weakening the power of opposition parties via both legal and extralegal means, and bringing smaller parties into its grand alliance. At the behest of AL, opposition party members and activists have faced a quagmire of corruption cases, property seizures, violent attacks, ballot stuffing or ballot box stealing at municipal elections, judicial neglect, media censure, and torture by law enforcement. In more outlandish scenarios, the leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia, had been barricaded from leaving her office. Some opposition activists have even undergone "enforced disappearances."

The AL government was also able to hit the nail on the coffin for JIB's political ambitions via a Supreme Court ruling in 2013 that barred JIB from participating in elections and through the 1971 war crimes trials that took place between 2011-16. JIB had already been weakened by the rise of other Islamic parties who had entered into AL's grand alliance; its frosty relationship with these other parties meant that it had to fend for itself in a shifting landscape. The AL-led war crimes trial against JIB leaders found public support via the Shahbag protests and its Gonojagoron moncho (a revival of the 1992 people's tribunal). The death sentence awarded to JIB leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee for various crimes in 1971 saw a wave of violence across the country carried out by JIB activists, followed by protests on the streets by BNP and JIB. The AL government responded in kind, and over 80 people were killed in clashes between police and protestors. Public opinion had, by this time, turned strongly against JIB.

But JIB's fall from grace did not spell the end of political Islam in the country - like the hydra, it continued to sprout up in other political formations. The Hefazat-e-Islam movement that began in the Qawmi madrasas in Bangladesh made itself known as a cultural force in 2013 right as JIB was losing ground. Hefazat hosted gatherings all around the country from Feb 2013 onwards to protest the "attack on Islam" and called on the government to protect Islamic values. In May 2013, Hefazat called for a "siege" of the capital, Dhaka. Thousands of madrasa students and teachers showed up to the city only to find themselves brutally attacked by AL activists acting in concert with the state security apparatus. Yet, despite such repressive measures, Hefazat remains an active political force today in Bangladesh, at times in an uneasy alliance since 2018 with the very same AL government

that brought down its hammer on them.

Identity Struggles: Cultural and Material

If it appears that the AL government has won their hand in the political battleground against Islamists via repressive measures, then the cultural turns in Bangladesh society paint a different picture. The government ignored attacks on high-profile secular intellectuals, or reluctantly investigated them, as the case of Avijit Roy shows. Despite its initial reaction to Hefazat, the AL government has followed Hefazat's line on cultural battles - from banning a laundry list of websites suspected of spreading pornography to condemning non-profit organizations providing sex education. In fact, the Arabization of Bangladeshi society is well underway. The hijab, for instance, has become more common among the younger generation than previous years, and certain words have changed from their original Bengali usage to Arab/Urdu ones, especially for Islamic terms (sehri has become suhur). When a cultural event is deemed "un-Islamic" by local preachers, the municipal governments are more than willing to shut it down.

The AL government does, however, take a hardline approach against the Islamists when they threaten their power - more specifically, their economic power which forms the basis of their legitimacy. The government makes much of the fact that it has increased infrastructure spending (mostly through foreign investment with dubious and secretive terms), accelerated GDP growth (finally dispelling the "basket case" myth), held trials for war criminals (who also happened to be political opponents) and built up an export economy (mostly off the backs of exploited workers). Thus when the Islamists challenged the bases on which its economic and political power rely, the government has cracked down on them. For example, Hefazat's protests in 2011 and 2013 against female garment workers, a key demographic in Bangladesh's workforce, were met with heavy-handed measures.

The relationship between India's right wing Modi government and AL further clarifies the assertion above. In 2021, Modi's visit to Bangladesh saw country-wide protests led by Hefazat against the Indian government's well-known anti-Muslim oppression. Per course, the Bangladeshi security apparatus quelled these protests with deadly force. The use of deadly force against such protests has become normalized as the government has grown more authoritarian. To understand these extreme measures, we also need to remember that Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner: in 2021-22, the trade turnover amounted to \$18.2 billion USD.

Various factors - from the historically unequal economic relationship between Bangladesh and India (most recently exemplified by the Adani power deal) to the AL government's failure to stem border killings by India's Border Security Forces or protect Bangladeshi farmers from being dispossessed by Indian-led dam development - have all lent further credence to the Islamists', and a portion of the general public's, perception that AL's policies are ultimately biased towards Indian interests. This perception no doubt threatens the legitimacy of the AL government, hence why it's so keen to aggressively nip such ideas in the bud.

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Bangladesh is also more than happy to work with other countries known to oppress Muslim populations. Protests against the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang against Uyghurs hardly make a dent in China's billion dollar infrastructure investments in the country. And while Bangladesh still hasn't recognized Israel as a country, its government is not averse to purchasing surveillance and security equipment from Israeli companies, despite Israel's continued apartheid

against Palestinians and Bangladesh's own history of supporting Palestinian liberation.

On the other hand, the AL government has leveraged Bangladesh's majority Muslim identity to further economic and political relations with the Arab World and Turkey. The Middle East has long been a destination for exporting Bangladeshi human capital and foreign remittance makes up a key sector of its economy, with Saudi Arabia as the largest source of remittance. Turkey, under the leadership of yet another authoritarian government undergoing a similar identity crisis, has increased its economic and military relations with Bangladesh in recent years.

These developing relations, however, do not signal any strengthening of Bangladesh as an explicitly Islamic country. Rather, it shows that the government leverages identity in the interest of capital, often to devastating consequences. Between 2016-2022, 714 corpses of female Bangladeshi migrant workers were returned to the country, mostly from the Middle East. In 2022, 3838 migrant workers returned as corpses. Muslims sacrificed by other Muslims at the altar of capitalism. The Bangladesh government's priority was made clear in the foreign minister's 2019 remarks when 119 corpses returned - that these deaths were insignificant compared to the number of women who worked in Saudi Arabia. Only in 2022 did the government acknowledge for the first time that female workers faced abuse in Saudi Arabia, but it has yet to enact any sort of labor rights protections for its migrant workforce.

The Specter of Authoritarianism

The polarization between the Muslim and Bengali identities in Bangladesh continues to intensify. The advent of social media has seriously aggravated the situation, where fake news is used to instigate attacks on Hindus or castigate fellow Muslims if they deviate from the expectations of hardliners. The AL government continues to play the politics of expediency to further extend its hold on power.

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On the one hand, it sides with the Islamists to bolster its appeal as a majority Muslim state and continue attracting funds from Muslim countries. On the other, in an effort to keep its key electoral constituents - secular liberals and non-Muslim minorities - AL maintains a hardline approach on Islamists, but only when their actions threaten its legitimacy. This balancing act is aided by the increasing securitization of the state in the last two decades, which, instead of eliminating the extremist Islamist threat and protecting minorities, has paved the way towards an authoritarian state. In sum, the identity crisis, arising from the scars of the 1947 Partition and carefully nurtured by political parties in the last five decades for political gains, has brought the specter of authoritarianism once again to haunt Bangladesh.

With the lack of any coherent left formation that can challenge the AL regime, and the opposition parties in disarray, the Islamists fill the void of the opposition and continue to garner public support, especially in rural areas. The dissolution of an urban-rural divide, Afsan Chowdhury writes, means that there is now a new “urban-rural continuum” that brings urban secular and liberal elites into the same socio-political milieu as the rural folks who are more inclined to be religious and conservative. Hefazat's anti-government screeds, mired in attacks against secular governance systems, also serve to build a connection between the apparent ills of secularism and the material oppression of the country's working class, who face rising food prices, deepening unemployment, and worsening living conditions.

It is ironic, then, that the Islamists continue to turn their ire onto the anti-authoritarian manifestations of Bangladeshi culture - the Mongol Shobhajatra began in the late 80s as a form of protest against H.M. Ershad's autocratic rule. If there is to be a successful mass movement against authoritarian rule, it will come from a synthesis of identities, just as it had for the country's liberation, not the pyrrhic victory of one over the other.

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