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BANGLADESHI POLITICS SINCE INDEPENDENCE

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On June 29, 1974, security forces escorted a 94-year-old leftist dissident back to his hometown after he criticized the government at a rally in Dhaka (Maniruzzaman, 1975, p.121). The dissident, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, was a veteran politician, popularly known as the 'Red Maulana' due to his socialist orientation and religious educational background. Decades later, on May 6, 2013, state security officers dispatched yet another nonagenarian dissident Maulana back to his hometown after his movement, Hefazat-e-Islam, challenged the government's legitimacy at a rally in the capital. This dissident, Shah Ahmad Shafi, had recently ventured into politics to demand that the government align the country with his movement's socially conservative interpretation of Islam. Between the two rallies, the world stage had witnessed massive changes: the systematic weakening of leftists and increased visibility of Islamists, the end of the Cold War and the onset of the War on Terror, and the complex consequences of neoliberalism. The two rallies not only reflect interconnections between domestic dynamics and the global context, but also underline the diverse challenges the Bangladeshi state has faced.

Bangladesh is one of the few Muslim-majority countries to have sustained procedural democracy for a significant period of time and has been upheld as a model for other developing countries due to its gains in human development, but has also drawn attention because of the intensity of its conflictual politics. In 2013, 507 people died as a result of political violence, while 22,407 were injured (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2014). Much of the political violence occurred during *hartals* or general strikes called by opposition parties to put pressure on the government to meet various demands. The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry has estimated that each hartal day costs the economy over US$200 million (*Wall Street Journal*, 2013). During hartals, opposition party cadres clash, sometimes fatally, with ruling party cadres and the police. Opposition party cadres violently enforce strikes whenever possible, by threatening or attacking vehicles and citizens who defy the hartal.

The persistence of political institutions that do not effectively distribute power and economic resources makes instability a recurring feature of politics in Bangladesh. This chapter traces how Bangladesh's inheritance of weak institutions at the time of independence has fueled the expansion of patronage networks, manipulation of institutions for political gain, and intense competition over economic and political resources. Bangladesh's first-past-the-post electoral system tends to exacerbate these problems: it deprives the opposition of parliamentary

authority and reduces checks on the ruling party's power, multiplies opportunities for corruption, facilitates the use of state resources to marginalize opponents, and pushes opponents toward extra-parliamentary measures, such as insurgency, assassinations, coups, street protests, and hartals (Siddiqi, 2011, p.7). After introducing four political parties that have influenced Bangladesh's political development, this chapter traces the impact of institutional weakness on democratic commitment and political instability during different episodes of Bangladesh's history: Bangladesh's first democratic experiment from 1972 to 1975; military rule from 1975 to 1990, and civilian rule from 1991 to the present.

Major political parties

Bangladesh has a first-past-the-post parliamentary electoral system with single member districts. Such systems tend to be dominated by two large parties. The center-left Awami League (AL) and the center-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) currently dominate the political stage. Other political parties have had difficulty competing with these two parties at the national level. As citizens can elect only one representative for their constituency, they are less likely to vote for candidates from smaller parties that do not have the reach and resources necessary to win at the national level and thereby influence the allocation of resources. Two other parties, the centrist Jatiya Party (JP) and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), have also played important roles in national politics in spite of their relatively smaller vote shares.

Awami League (AL): Under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (popularly known as Sheikh Mujib), the AL won the national parliamentary elections of Pakistan in 1970, but President Yahya Khan annulled the results, cracked down on Bengalis in East Pakistan, and arrested Sheikh Mujib in March 1971. After a nine-month-long Liberation War, during which AL leaders formed a provisional government-in-exile, Bangladesh emerged as an independent country on December 16, 1971. Sheikh Mujib, celebrated as *Bangabandhu* (literally 'Friend of Bengal') and the Founder of the Nation, ruled Bangladesh from 1972 until his assassination by army officers in 1975. In 1981, his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, was elected leader of the AL. Sheikh Hasina served two terms as prime minister from 1996 to 2000 and 2008 to 2013. In January 2014, after the AL claimed victory in elections boycotted by the major opposition party, Sheikh Hasina continued serving as prime minister. A center-left party, the AL initially articulated a platform based on socialism, secularism (non-communalism), Bengali nationalism, and close relations with India and the Soviet Union, but over time, it has embraced economic liberalization, emphasized its commitment to Islam, and strengthened relations with the United States.

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP): In 1978, the then president, General Ziaur Rahman, founded the center-right BNP. Ziaur Rahman was the army officer who had declared Bangladesh's independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujib in March 1971 and taken power after Sheikh Mujib's assassination in 1975. As a response to the AL's emphasis on Bengali nationalism, the BNP sought to develop a 'Bangladeshi nationalism' that would distinguish Bangladeshi Bengalis from Indian Bengalis and emphasize the Muslim identity of the majority of Bangladesh's citizens. It also sought to establish stronger relations with the United States and Muslim-majority countries, particularly oil-rich ones, and adopted economic liberalization programs. An umbrella party, the BNP attracted people with grievances against the AL, including military personnel, business people, pro-China leftists, and Islamists. The BNP ruled the country from 1979 to 1981 under Ziaur Rahman and then from 1991 to 1996 and 2001 to 2006 under the leadership of his widow, Khaleda Zia.

Jatiya Party (JP): In 1986, Hussain Mohammad Ershad, the former army chief who had taken power in 1982, shortly after Ziaur Rahman's assassination, founded the JP. Similar to the BNP,

the JP advocated economic liberalization and close ties with Muslim countries and the United States. The JP won parliamentary elections in 1986 and 1988 and dominated the parliament under Ershad's leadership until he resigned in 1990.

Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JI): The JI is Bangladesh's main Islamist party. During the Liberation War, the JI refused to support freedom fighters and several members collaborated with the Pakistani Army. The 1972 constitution banned religion-based political parties, but Ziaur Rahman allowed the JI to resume political activities. The JI's vote share in elections has been small, but the BNP has sought (and received) its support to compete against the AL and enabled it to play a disproportionately important role in politics. The JI has made some doctrinal compromises, such as accepting a woman's political leadership and supporting women's political participation (Shehabuddin, 2008; interviews, JI members, Dhaka, 2010). It has, however, advocated various restrictions on civil and political liberties. For example, it demanded an anti-blasphemy law in the early 1990s and the declaration of Ahmadiyyas, who self-identify as Muslim, as non-Muslims. The JI's student wing, the Islami Chhatro Shibir, maintains an active presence on several university campuses. In 2009, the AL-led government set up an International Crimes Tribunal, which convicted several JI leaders for war crimes, amidst accusations from the BNP and JI that the trials sought to incapacitate the opposition rather than serve justice.

Bangladesh's first democratic experiment: 1972–1975

An inheritance of institutional weakness: the roots of conflictual politics

Kiren Chaudhry (1993) has argued that post-colonial states often struggle to build responsive political institutions, because these would threaten entrenched interests and require financial and administrative resources that such states usually lack. In order to consolidate power, many leaders preferred to assume direct control over institutions, national resources, and industries in order to build patronage networks, expand their own base of support, and weaken opponents. After the Liberation War in 1971, Bangladesh dove into the challenges of reconstruction and state building with a weakened civil bureaucracy, a factionalized military, and a depleted economy, amidst concerns about Indian hegemony and uncertainty about international recognition and financial support. Such factors made it difficult for leaders to focus on building responsive institutions that could effectively distribute power and economic resources and address citizens' needs and grievances. Leaders therefore often relied on centralized decision making and patronage to consolidate power and address pressing problems.

Upon his return to Bangladesh from Pakistan in January 10, 1972, Sheikh Mujib embarked on the ambitious task of creating a secular, democratic, and socialist state, while trying to restore order and coordinate reconstruction. The AL won a landslide victory in the 1973 parliamentary elections, but the Mujib regime faced multiple challenges to its authority due to the divergent ideological and material expectations Bangladesh's liberation had generated. Major leftist opposition groups including the Jatiyo Samajtrantrik Dol (JSD – National Socialist Party) and Maulana Bhashani's National Awami Party (NAP) accused Sheikh Mujib of failing to meet the needs of citizens, especially workers and peasants. The state also struggled to control insurgents such as radical leftists who sought a 'Second Revolution' that would overthrow Sheikh Mujib's 'petty bourgeois' rule (Maniruzzaman, 1975, p.121). Other domestic and international actors found Sheikh Mujib's professed support for socialism and state-led economic planning objectionable and wanted Bangladesh to adopt a less pro-Soviet and more pro-US stance. Sheikh Mujib's emphasis on Bengali nationalism also generated grievances among non-Bengali communities. Manabendra Narayan Larma, an MP from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, criticized

Sheikh Mujib's call for indigenous communities to embrace Bengali culture. Amidst multiple challenges to his authority, as well as devastating floods and famine, Sheikh Mujib gave paramount importance to the assertion of political stability in Bangladesh.

Restoring order proved to be a difficult task, as two of the most important state institutions for stability, the civil bureaucracy and military, were weak and fragmented. According to Jahan (1974), tensions and competition arose between bureaucrats who had worked with the government-in-exile during the Liberation War and those who had not. The fragmentation of the bureaucracy complicated the task of reconstruction and restoration of order. A 1972 Presidential Order that permitted the non-appealable dismissal of civil servants fueled concerns about job security, while parliamentary supervision constrained the autonomy of the bureaucracy (Jahan, 1974, pp.129–130; Maniruzzaman, 1975, p.125).

The military was also factionalized and some personnel developed strong grievances toward the AL government. By rewarding officers who had fought for Bangladesh's liberation with early promotions, AL leaders generated resentment among officers who had been stranded in West Pakistan and repatriated after the war. The Mujib government's close relations with India, which the Pakistani Army had trained both Bengali and non-Bengali officers to consider the enemy, also irked some army officers (Khan, 1982, p.169; Maniruzzaman, 1975, p.123). Furthermore, certain army personnel complained that most of the annual defense budget went toward supporting the *Rakkhi Bahini*, a paramilitary force formed by the Mujib government in March 1972 to fight armed insurgents (Jahan, 1973, p.206; Maniruzzaman, 1976, p.122). The fragmentation and perceived marginalization of the army in independent Bangladesh therefore deprived the AL government of a crucial source of political stability.

The demise of Bangladesh's first democratic experiment

The majoritarian parliamentary system gave Sheikh Mujib yet another means by which to concentrate power in his own hands amidst intensifying challenges to his government. In January 1975, Sheikh Mujib used the AL's parliamentary dominance to pass a constitutional amendment that established a presidential system, banned existing political parties, and invited citizens to join a single national party, BAKSAL (the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League). He argued that a one-party presidential system would bolster national unity and reduce political strife, but this move aggravated grievances and heralded the end of Bangladesh's first democratic experiment.

In the context of the Cold War, Sheikh Mujib's adoption of a one-party model deepened anxiety among domestic and international anti-socialist forces. Eight months later, disgruntled army officers assassinated Sheikh Mujib and all but two members of his family on August 15, 1975. As a result of this coup, an anti-socialist faction took power and imprisoned four high-profile AL leaders. This faction also promoted Ziaur Rahman from deputy chief of army to chief of army. A complicated power struggle ensued among various factions. On November 3, a pro-Mujib faction moved to regain power from the anti-socialist faction, which, fearing the return of the AL, ordered the murder of the four jailed AL leaders, including Tajuddin Ahmed, Bangladesh's wartime prime minister. Bangladesh thus lost two of its most iconic civilian politicians, Sheikh Mujib and Tajuddin Ahmed, within three months. For the next 15 years, the political stage would be dominated by the military.

The restorationist pro-Mujib faction had placed the army chief, Ziaur Rahman, under house arrest, but a soldiers' revolt freed him on November 7 in a coup led by Colonel Abu Taher, a leftist freedom fighter who wanted to eliminate differences between soldiers and officers in the army. In his drive to consolidate power, Ziaur Rahman eventually ordered the arrest of Colonel

Taher, who was convicted of treason by a military tribunal and hanged on July 21, 1976. Ziaur Rahman would continue to purge the army of revolutionary leftist officers and eroded the strength of leftists in Bangladesh.

The military strikes back: 1975–1990

Rather than developing autonomous and responsive political institutions, Bangladesh's leaders repeatedly used and reshaped political institutions to consolidate their own power. Military rule under Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981) and Ershad (1982–1990) would continue to treat institutions as malleable and subservient to political interests. Both leaders used constitutional amendments to legalize their actions, indemnify themselves from prosecution, and emphasize their Islamic credentials to gain domestic and international support. Ziaur Rahman replaced 'secularism' with 'Absolute Trust and Faith in Almighty Allah' and inserted 'In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful' into the preamble of the constitution, while Ershad declared Islam the state religion. Their adoption of neoliberal policies such as privatization reinforced patronage networks through crony capitalism. The sale of state-owned enterprises in the 1970s and 1980s gave the leaders a valuable tool for rewarding and gaining supporters. In addition to reshaping institutions to consolidate power, the two leaders also emphasized their contributions toward restoring order, attracting foreign aid, and intensifying development activity (Bertocci, 1982).

Ziaur Rahman and Ershad adopted similar methods to civilianize their rule (Bertocci, 1985, pp.156–157). They organized parliamentary elections only after they had built grassroots support through local elections, won presidential elections to retain leadership of the country, and launched their own political parties. Ziaur Rahman created the BNP in September 1978 to compete with the AL, while Ershad created the JP in January 1986 to compete with the AL and the BNP. Parliamentary elections took place under Ziaur Rahman in February 1979 and under Ershad in May 1986 and March 1988.

In spite of such efforts, Ziaur Rahman and Ershad faced considerable challenges to their rule. Ziaur Rahman was assassinated by army officers in May 1981. Ershad managed to minimize challenges from the army by providing officers considerable benefits, such as bureaucratic appointments, opportunities for corporate engagement, strengthening the Sena Kalyan Sangstha (Army Development Committee), low-cost land acquisition, higher salaries and allowances, improvements in housing and infrastructure in cantonments, and participation in UN peace-keeping missions. Ironically, Ershad's attempts to win the military's support through economic incentives eventually increased the army's stake in maintaining their privileges, rather than keeping Ershad in power (Rahman, 1989; Bhattacharjee, 2010). As Eva Bellin (2012) has argued, the military's ability to dissociate its interests from the leader's fate decreases its willingness to repress protestors and generates opportunities for regime change.

Inter-party cooperation and the fall of Ershad in 1990

The anti-Ershad movement stands out as one of the few examples of inter-party cooperation in Bangladesh. The AL and BNP jointly formulated five demands: the end of martial law, restoration of constitutional rights, parliamentary elections prior to local and presidential ones, the release of political prisoners, and the trial of those responsible for five students' deaths in mid-February 1983 (Bertocci, 1985, p.158). In 1984, they also agreed to allow the JI to participate in the anti-Ershad movement. Through strikes and sit-ins, the AL, BNP, and JI sought to put pressure on Ershad, even though their alliance often collapsed in the face of political calculations. In 1986, the BNP called for a boycott of parliamentary elections and saw the AL's

decision to participate in them as a tremendous blow to the anti–Ershad movement (Islam, 1987, pp.164–165). The JI also decided to contest the elections. Shortly after the JP, Ershad's party, won majority control of parliament, however, the AL boycotted parliament and rejoined the anti-Ershad movement, because its demands continued to go unheeded. In the summer of 1987, the BNP and AL succeeded in using hartals to force Ershad to withdraw a bill institution-alizing military participation in district councils (Islam, 1988, p.165). On November 10, 1987, the parties organized a rally to demand Ershad's resignation. The police shot several protestors, including Noor Hossain, an activist with the words 'Let Democracy Be Free' painted on his back (*New Age*, 2012). The AL, BNP, and JI all boycotted the parliamentary elections of 1988 (Blair, 2010, p.100).

Women's rights organizations, workers, and students also challenged Ershad's rule. The par-ticipation of Islamists in the anti-Ershad movement, according to a member of the JP, pushed Ershad to declare Islam the state religion of Bangladesh through the Eighth Amendment to the constitution in May 1988 to 'take the wind out of Islamist opponents' sails' (interview, member of the JP, Dhaka, March 10, 2010). In response to this instance of institutional manipulation, women's rights organizations argued the amendment contradicted the constitutional equal-ity of citizens and was unconstitutional. Naripokkho, a feminist organization, filed a case to challenge the amendment (Karim, 2011, p.12). The Ershad regime also generated grievances among trade unions when it broke a promise to ensure workers' rights (Maniruzzaman, 1992, pp.205–206). In October 1990, student organizations, including the student wings of the BNP and AL, formed the All Party Students' Unity to demand Ershad's resignation and parliamentary elections under a non-partisan caretaker government. This put pressure on their parent political parties to maintain a unified front and jointly participate in protests and strikes.

On November 27, 1990, the killing of a doctor, Shamsul Alam Khan Milon, on the Dhaka University campus triggered acts of civil disobedience by journalists, doctors, civil servants, and business people. Ershad sought the military's support to reinstate martial law, but the army chief, Lieutenant General Nuruddin Khan, refused to support this move and Ershad resigned on December 4 (Maniruzzaman, 1992, pp.207–208). In 1990, the high level of social mobil-ization and the army's concerns about economic assets and access to UN peacekeeping mis-sions eroded its willingness to repress protestors. Ershad's attempts to keep the army satisfied through patronage during his tenure had paradoxically increased the officers' willingness to replace their patron with one of his political opponents in order to preserve their economic interests (Maniruzzaman, 1992, p.208). On December 6, 1990, in accordance with the demands of the opposition parties, Ershad handed power over to a non-partisan caretaker government, which organized parliamentary elections.

Institutional manipulation and fragmentation under civilian rule: 1991–present

On February 27, 1991, the BNP won 30.81 percent and the AL 30.03 percent of the national vote. The two parties won similar vote shares, but the BNP defeated the AL in a greater num-ber of the 300 constituencies: the BNP received 140 seats and the AL 88 (Blair, 2010, p.100). Securing the JI's support enabled the BNP to gain majority control of the parliament and appoint Khaleda Zia as prime minister. The BNP's parliamentary victory possibly, however, enabled the BNP and AL to resolve their long-standing disagreement about the form of gov-ernment. The BNP had wanted to preserve the presidential form of government, but the AL wanted the restoration of the parliamentary system. Perhaps reassured by its victory in the par-liamentary elections, the BNP agreed to pass the Twelfth Constitutional Amendment, which

restored a parliamentary form of government and nullified the need for separate presidential elections.

After 15 years of military rule, Bangladesh thus relaunched its democratic transition with a first-past-the-post parliamentary system, a literacy rate of 35.52 percent, and a low per capita GDP. As such, it seemed to lack several 'prerequisites of democracy'. Adam Przeworski (2004) has argued that democracy is more likely to endure at higher levels of economic development, as people tend to enjoy greater economic security under democracies than dictatorships. Yet, by 2001, Bangladesh seemed to have passed Samuel Huntington's (1993) two-turnover test for democratic consolidation, meaning there had been two peaceful transfers of power through elections: the AL won elections in 1996 and the BNP won elections in 2001. Bangladesh became one of the few Muslim-majority countries to experience regular transfers of power through independently monitored free and fair elections.

Anxieties about the neutrality of electoral institutions and the need to sustain patron–client relations have, however, fueled political antagonism and violence under civilian rule. Ruling parties' attempts to weaken the opposition through human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings and restrictions on political and civil liberties have reflected the expansion of state power and constrained substantive democratization (Hossain, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2013; Mohaiemen, 2013). Bangladesh shows how ostensibly democratic institutions can cannibalize democracy when they do not adequately ensure power sharing. Bangladesh's winner-takes-all electoral system accords little power to electoral losers, so winning elections becomes a matter of survival to political parties who fear their elaborate support networks may disintegrate if they are unable to distribute money, administrative positions, jobs, contracts, and protection to supporters. Bangladesh's economic growth, fueled by ready-made garments exports and remittances from migrant workers, has decreased the country's reliance on donors for aid and foreign exchange and made losing elections all the more costly. As Akhtar Hossain (2000) writes, 'economic stakes are too high to lose gracefully'. The struggles over the caretaker government provision illustrate how political actors have continued to see politics as a zero-sum game and resorted to multiple forms of violence to gain access to political and economic resources.

Political parties and the caretaker government provision: a love–hate relationship

Debates about the need for a neutral caretaker government system to oversee parliamentary elections have been at the heart of the tug-of-war between incumbents and the opposition. When in power, political parties criticize the caretaker government system as undemocratic, but when in the opposition, they seem willing to sacrifice hundreds of lives to ensure its implementation. In 1994, the AL accused the ruling BNP of rigging a by-election in a constituency and argued that the BNP could not be trusted to hold free and fair parliamentary elections in 1996. For two years, the AL held mass protests, strikes, and blockades to force the BNP to concede to a non-partisan caretaker government that would organize the parliamentary elections. The BNP argued that such an unelected body would be unconstitutional and decided to go forward with elections in February 1996, even though the AL boycotted the elections. The BNP won the elections, but came under massive criticism from civil society, the business community, and civil servants (Kochanek, 1997, p.137). It then passed the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment, which institutionalized the caretaker government provision, and handed power over to a non-partisan caretaker government, which held new elections in June 1996. The AL won these elections and, at the end of its five-year term in 2001, handed power over to a caretaker government. A BNP-led alliance, which included the JI, won the parliamentary elections

in 2001. The caretaker government mechanism thus bolstered the legitimacy and fairness of the June 1996 and October 2001 elections and facilitated the transfer of power from one party to another.

Ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 2007, however, the BNP's attempt at manipulating the mechanism led to political violence and instability. The AL argued that the chief advisor of the caretaker government was a BNP loyalist and could not be trusted to ensure free and fair elections. The BNP's refusal to change the composition of the caretaker government intensified the AL's program of street protests, hartals, and block-ades (Hagerty, 2007, p.106). This eventually led to the military's intervention on January 11, 2007, the installation of a technocratic caretaker government, and the postponement of par-liamentary elections. The caretaker government promised to prepare the country for free and fair elections by issuing voter identity cards with photos to reduce fraud. It also launched an anti-corruption drive that imprisoned several prominent politicians, including Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. Mehnaaz Momen (2009) suggested that the caretaker government's treat-ment of politicians and two-year tenure might lead to efforts to restrict or abolish the system after the elections.

Momen's prediction was correct. The AL won a landslide victory in the 2008 elections: it won three-fourths of parliamentary seats and gained the clout necessary to make constitutional amendments unilaterally. In June 2011, the AL-dominated parliament passed the Fifteenth Constitutional Amendment, which abolished the caretaker system, ostensibly due to a recent Supreme Court ruling that deemed the provision unconstitutional. The BNP accused the rul-ing party of taking steps to deliberately disadvantage the opposition. The AL retorted that the caretaker system was undemocratic, as it enables an unelected body to rule the country during the 90-day transition from one elected government to the next, and therefore unconstitutional. It argued that the Electoral Commission would conduct free and fair elections, as do its coun-terparts in other democracies without a caretaker government system.

Bangladesh therefore witnessed a stunning, albeit unsurprising, reversal of roles: the AL, the party that had launched a two-year campaign of parliamentary boycotts, hartals, and blockades from 1994 to 1996 against the then ruling BNP for the institutionalization of the caretaker government, now, as the ruling party, abolished the provision in June 2011 and watched the BNP and other opposition parties violently enforce hartals and blockades through December 2013. Just as the AL refused to participate in elections organized by the BNP in February 1996, the BNP boycotted the parliamentary elections on January 5, 2014. The AL declared an elect-oral victory and, as of February 2015, did not concede to the BNP's demand for new elections under a non-partisan caretaker government.

After the election on January 5, 2014, Bangladesh experienced relative calm for a year, as the BNP seemed to focus its efforts on strengthening its grassroots support amidst popular fatigue with hartals and blockades, but in January 2015, the intransigence of the political parties drew the country into yet another round of intense instability and violence. The BNP wanted to hold a protest rally in the capital on January 5, 2015, the one-year anni-versary of the election it had boycotted. When the AL did not give the BNP permission to hold the rally, the BNP accused the ruling party of denying it a space for legitimate political protest and launched a nationwide transport blockade program and frequent hartals. The AL accused the BNP and JI of terrorism due to the proliferation of petrol bombs hurled at vehicles operating during the blockade and hartals (Mahmud, 2015). Several cases have been filed against BNP and JI leaders for the attacks (*Daily Star*, 2015). *The Economist* (2015) reported that 10,000 opposition activists have been arrested. The BNP has alleged that the ruling party's cadres have executed the attacks in order to discredit the opposition (UNB,

2015). As a result of the violence, over 60 people died during the first two months of 2015 (*The Independent*, 2015). In spite of the heavy toll political instability has inflicted on citizens and the economy (Hossain, 2015), the BNP has pledged to continue its anti-government programs and the AL has emphasized it will not engage in negotiations with terrorists (Molla, 2015).

Conclusion

In 2011, the AL-dominated parliament passed an amendment to reinstate 'secularism' in the constitution. Although the amendment made secularism an immutable constitutional principle, the BNP vowed to strike it from the constitution whenever it comes to power. Conflictual politics in Bangladesh has made policy continuity and stability elusive as power holders rewrite the rules of the game in order to consolidate power and marginalize opponents. Bangladesh's first-past-the-post single member district electoral system paves the way for elective dictatorship, whereby the winning party dominates decision making, marginalizes opponents, and thereby increases the likelihood of political violence. Arend Lijphart (1996), in *Constitutional Choices for New Democracies*, argues that majoritarian models of government, such as the first-past-the-post parliamentary system, tend to foster more conflictual politics than consensus models, such as parliamentary proportional representation, because they foster winning party dominance in parliament, wasted votes, high barriers to entry for smaller parties, and fewer opportunities for power sharing. Bangladesh's electoral system increases the possibility of landslide victories that enhance the winning party's ability to make unilateral decisions and thereby intensify inter-party conflict (Przeworski, 2004; Riaz, 2013; Kalimullah and Hasan, 2014).

As Sheri Berman (1997) has argued, the absence of responsive political institutions may contribute to citizens' increased reliance on non-state actors for access to goods and services, but may also erode state actors' legitimacy and exacerbate political instability. In explaining Bangladesh's admirable gains in educational access, health, and poverty alleviation, observers recognize the contributions of non-state actors, who supplemented government policies and initiatives (*The Economist*, 2012; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2013; O'Malley, 2013). Two of the world's most celebrated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) originated in Bangladesh: BRAC and the Grameen Bank. NGOs such as Ain o Salish Kendra, Naripokkho, and Nijera Kori have played a vital role in criminalizing fatwa-related extrajudicial punishments, reducing acid attacks, stalling unjust evictions, challenging land grabs, and strengthening workers' and minorities' rights (interview, human rights lawyer, January 25, 2010). While such NGOs have generally sought to strengthen the social foundations of democracy in Bangladesh, non-state actors who do not necessarily support political and civil liberties have also emerged and challenged the very authority and legitimacy of the government, as Hefazat-e-Islam did in 2013.

As this overview of Bangladesh's political history has shown, challenges to state authority in Bangladesh have generally stemmed from the inability of institutions to adequately ensure power sharing, consensual decision making, and distribution of resources. Yet, political will for electoral reform is likely to be elusive among the two major parties (interviews, BNP and JP members, Dhaka, 2010), as an alternative system might threaten to dim the seemingly irresistible prospect of controlling state resources, require engagement in consensual decision making, and increase opportunities for inter-party checks on power. Until structural problems are addressed, however, attempts to suppress challenges are unlikely to foster sustainable political stability.

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2

NATIONALISM AND THE 'POLITICS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY'

Habibul Haque Khondker

In 1971 Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign, independent state embracing the principles of secularism and nationalism. But the secular character of nationalism changed along with the political regime in the mid-1970s. This chapter begins with a discussion of the conceptual issues of nationalism, national identity and identity politics to frame the historical developments of nationalism and shifting national identity in Bangladesh. The transformation of identity and the rise of a politics of national identity is not to be confused with the discussion of 'identity politics' (Gutman, 2003; Appiah, 2005; Eisenberg and Kymlicka, 2011). The discourse of identity politics is more germane to the multi-cultural democracies in the West. In Bangladesh the discussion of national identity has been politicized and problematized by a confluence of forces that this chapter attempts to unravel. The religious turn in the political and cultural landscapes has impacted the discourse of national identity in Bangladesh.

The religious turn was dramatically revealed in a mammoth gathering of the members of a little-known, Chittagong-based Islamic organization, Hefajat-e-Islam, and their sympathizers in the capital city Dhaka on April 6, 2013. As many as half-a-million Muslim supporters of this organization, many of whom were madrasa students, gathered at Shapla Chottor, the heart of the commercial district of Dhaka. A number of incendiary speeches were made. The speakers called for a return to the Middle Ages as far as the presence of women in the public space was concerned. They issued 13 demands that included a call for reinstating several Islamic principles in the constitution. That April day marked a visible shift in the ideological preference of Bangladesh. Apparently, the Islamists had come in droves to protest the alleged persecution of Islamists and to protest the so-called anti-Islamic blogs posted by the so-called 'atheist' bloggers who were supporting a students' movement known as the Shahbag Movement, in the vein of 'occupy movements' in several cities across the globe. The students, who had initially occupied an intersection near Shahbag, a busy junction in the middle of the city, were persuaded to move into the open space. They had been protesting in favor of harsher punishment, including death, to the war criminals who were being tried by a war crime tribunal. Several of the young protestors were active in social media, which they used effectively to organize the demonstration. Some of them were regular contributors to the blogosphere. These bloggers, in the eyes of the Islamist groups, were perceived as

being engaged in anti-Islamic propaganda. For these Islamist groups, bloggers became another name for atheists, without realizing that a significant number of pro-Islamic activists and even extremists write blogs on a regular basis.

The Islamist demonstrators had permission from the government to present their 13-point demands and then return to their villages. Termed, ironically, the 'Long March', the strength of the Islamists in Bangladesh was underscored. The major opposition political parties that included the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) attended the rally to express their solidarity with the Islamists. The veneer of secular Bengali culture was almost lost that day.

Bangladesh was exposed as a divided nation. The two major political parties – the Bangladesh Awami League (currently in power) and the BNP – represent two different narratives of nationalism and national identity. The BNP narrative comes dangerously close to the narrative of Jinnah's two-nation theory. Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, was the author of the two-nation theory as he claimed that Hindus and Muslims were not only divided by religion, they were two different nations. They are different in culture, in the food they consume and so on. Such division and accentuation of differences can be linked to the colonial domination.

Conceptual matters

The term 'nation' was first used in the thirteenth century to demarcate students from various foreign countries who came to study in some of the oldest European universities. Students at the University of Paris or the University of Bologna who came from other regions of Europe were divided into 'nations' based on language and their place of origin (Connor, 1978; Seton-Watson, 1994). The classic definition of nation comes from an unlikely source, namely, Joseph Stalin. According to Stalin, a nation is a stable community of people with a common language and a common territory, common economic life and physiological make-up manifested in a common culture (Hutchinson and Smith, 1994, p.21). A variation of that classic definition is offered by Anthony Smith, who describes a nation as a 'named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members' (Smith, 1991, p.14). Nationalism is a sense of belonging, a belief in common ancestry. 'Nation' originally meant 'birth' or 'descent'; a community to which an individual belonged by reason of birth (Connor, 1978).

Anthony Smith distinguishes two antagonistic schools of thought about nations and nationalism: the perennialists and the modernists (Smith, 2002, p.98). The former suggests that nations, if not nationalism, have existed throughout recorded history (Smith, 2002, p.5), and runs the risk of committing 'retrospective nationalism' (Smith, 2002, p.99). This view also implies a teleological inevitability best expressed in Nehru's 'tryst with destiny' formulation. The modernist perspective presents a contingent view of nation and nationalism that plays an important role in social solidarity in the modern age of fragmentation and decentering. One can also think of a parallel duality: the primordial versus the constructive. The primordial view shares some common ground with the perennial view as the constructivist or the instrumentalist view overlaps with the modernist position.

Benedict Anderson famously defined the nation thus: 'it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson, 2006, p.6). Anderson distinguished his notion of 'imagination' from Ernest Gellner's 'invention'. For Gellner,

> nationalism is not the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is how it does indeed present itself. It is in reality the consequence of a new form of social

> organization, based on deeply internalized, education-dependent high cultures, each protected by its own state. It uses some of the pre-existent cultures, generally transforming in the process.
>
> *(Gellner, 1983, p. 48)*

The contingent nature of nationalism is enmeshed with changes in human society. Observers of social change view social transformation in light of historical convulsions, contractions, non-linearity and discontinuity. Nationalism may evolve in certain junctures of historical transformation and, of course, in the emergence of nations, nationalism and national identity. The purely constructed nationalism follows the formations of nation states with the instrumentalist needs of creating a solidary nation out of a chaotic ensemble of peoples.

Anderson (2006) provides a useful threefold typology of nationalism: the creole, the vernacular and the official. Creole nationalism evolved in the anti-imperialist national struggle in late-eighteenth-century America, where neither language nor religion nor a common culture, nor even print capitalism played a critical role. The leaders of this nationalism were not even the middle class or intellectuals; rather they were a narrow coalition of 'substantial landowners, allied with a smaller number of merchants, and various types of professional (lawyers, military men, local and provincial functionaries)' (Anderson, 2006, p.48).

Vernacular nationalism can be taken to be the basis of nationalism in Europe in the nineteenth century, where '"national print languages" were of central ideological and political importance' (Anderson, 2006, p.67). The formation of maternal language-based nation-states in Europe is of fairly recent origin. The distinction made by Anderson (2006, p.41) between 'state language' and 'national language' has relevance for understanding the contemporary discourses on nationalism. As Anderson shows, England, for example, evolved from using Latin as the administrative or state language, which gave way to French between 1200 and 1350, and then English became the state administrative language only in the later part of the fourteenth century. While the languages of administration changed, most people 'knew little or nothing of Latin, Norman French, or Early English' (Anderson, 2006, p.41).

Drawing on the work of Aira Kemiläinen (1964), Anderson posits: 'The word nationalism did not come into wide general use until the end of the nineteenth century. It did not occur, for example, in many standard nineteenth century lexicons' (Anderson, 2006, p.4). Official nationalism emerged in late-nineteenth-century Europe in the context of dynastic rule and empires where print capitalism played an important role, along with the help of schools, and the imperial system was able to spread this nationalism to the periphery of the European empires, notably in India, Japan and Thailand.

In the twentieth-century wave of nationalism, the educated middle class, aided by their intellectual spokespersons, played an important role. Here Tom Nairn's formulation of the role of the middle class in the European nationalism of the nineteenth century has a resonance. 'The new middle-class intelligentsia of nationalism had to invite the masses into history; and the invitation-card had to be written in a language they understood' (Nairn, 1977, quoted in Anderson, 2006, p.80). In the twentieth-century version, middle-class intellectuals formed a bridge between the masses and the leadership, performing a crucial mobilizing role. Charles Tilly's classification (1994) of 'state-led nationalism' and 'state-seeking nationalism' is also important to note. Here a useful caveat is provided by Tilly's argument (1991, pp.2–3) that historically most states were non-national (empires, city-states, etc.) and national states are new, yet they pre-date the nation-state infused with national identity.

Bhikhu Parekh holds that 'National identity is not primordial, a brute unalterable fact of life and passively inherited by each generation' (Parekh, 2008, p.60). Against the constructivist,

Parekh cautions, 'No political community is a tabula rasa … It has a certain history, traditions, beliefs, qualities of character and historical memories, which delimit the range of alternatives open to it … National identity is both given and periodically reconstituted' (Parekh, 2008, p.61). The discussion of the construction of national identity in Bangladesh also has to take note of the historical preconditions that inform the various constructions of national identity.

Nationalism and national identity in Bangladesh

There are two strands of discussion of the development of national identity in Bangladesh: the culturalist and the structuralist. According to A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed: 'From time immemorial the Bengali-speaking people have looked upon themselves with pride as Bengalis.' The switch to a new nomenclature, 'Bangladeshi', according to Ahmed, 'does not conform to historical reality' (Ahmed, 1994, p.9). For Ahmed, although rooted deep in Bengali cultural traditions, Bengali nationalism was formed during the Pakistan period (1947–1971) when people in this region became 'deeply conscious of their distinct Bengali identity' (Ahmed, 1994, p.9). Ahmed quotes Hans Kohn's suggestion that 'Nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness, which since the French Revolution has become more and more common to mankind' (Kohn in Ahmed, 1994, p.15). Ahmed also invokes Ernest Renan's claim that

> A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which are really one, constitute this soul, the spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich inheritance of memories. The other is the present consent, the desire to live together.
>
> *(Renan in Ahmed, 1994, p.16)*

In fact, the quest for nationalism in Bangladesh fits more closely to Gellner's appraisal of nationalism 'as the striving to make culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof' (Gellner, 1983, p.43).

The culturalist view was not shared by the structuralist or Marxist interpretations. Borhanuddin Jahangir provides a class-based, ergo Marxist, analysis of nationalism. Nationalism, according to this view, is an expression of articulation of class hegemony and also an expression of interrelations of people in a historical situation. It is, to borrow Laclau's words, 'the first movement in the dialectic between the people and classes' (Jahangir, 1986, p.36). For Jahangir, nationalism and populism are twin ideologies that are fused into a strategy of petty-bourgeois politics. The class basis of nationalism does not advance our understanding of nationalism as a supra-class ideology other than to rehash an old doctrinaire understanding of nationalism as a petty-bourgeois ideology. In Jahangir's analysis the seemingly variant forms of secularist nationalism of Sheikh Mujib and the Islam-based nationalism of Ziaur Rahman are both manifestations of the ideology of different factions of the petty bourgeoisie, and yet sought to represent the aspirations of all the people, presumably the predominant working classes of Bangladesh. Whether nationalism is an ideology of the petty bourgeoisie or what can be called a middle class in non-Maxist discourse, it will be useful to consider nationalism as a unifying ideology originating in the middle-class intellectuals reaching out and mobilizing the entire society to achieve a defined set of objectives – one of which is to establish its own state and political community. Whether this unifying supra-ideology overpowers class-based ideologies and class antagonism is but an unintended consequence of nationalist movements. For Tom Nairn, an important Marxist scholar, 'the theory of nationalism represents Marxism's great historical failure' (Nairn, 1975, p.3).

To ignore the ideological differences between secularist and Islamist nationalism owing to an intra-class conflict would be highly reductionist. The power of ideas and beliefs in the late-twentieth-century world has been proven time and again, and no amount of referencing the Marxist literature will help resolve faultlines that are more ideological than class-based. The autonomy of ideology has to be reckoned with.

Jahangir, in his neo-Marxist analysis studded with quotations from Ernesto Laclau and Nicos Poulantzas, approvingly quotes Anthony Smith to suggest that 'urban populism is a phase or moment of nationalism … One which answers to the cultural needs of intelligentsia in less developed societies overshadowed by the scientific and political preeminence of the West' (Smith, 1983, p.109). Jahangir captures the conflation of populism and the cultural bases of nationalism when he says that

> Zainul Abedin the painter, Jasimuddin the poet, Abbasuddin the singer and Sheikh Mujib the politician: all in their own way interpreted the different moments of populism, answered the needs of the 'small man's' longing for warmth and security of the indigenous framework and cheered a romantic nationalism's yearning towards an urban populism that extols rural folkways.
>
> *(Jahangir, 1986, p.47)*

The appeal to an originary culture and a nostalgia for a past that probably is more imagined than historical are the standard features of nationalism. What makes the discussion of nationalism truly problematic is who defines the past and what aspects of the past are given attention in the reconstruction. Here lies the nub of the problem. The so-called secularist nationalism in Bangladesh also draws from Bengali folk cultures that are admixtures of folk religions and mysticism, and are thus not free from religious content. Multivocal and synthetic make-up is the primary source of the strength of the folk traditions. The constructivists created a purified Islamic tradition as the base of their nationalist ethos. This distinction is difficult to overlook. The penetrations and coexistence of multiple religious traditions in the folkways of Bangladesh provide a strength and durability.

In the absence of any empirical research done on the changing identities of Bengalis, we often see a tendency in nationalistic narrative to draw a straight line in the rise of Bengali nationalism from the language movement of 1950s to the movement for provincial autonomy and so on. A study conducted on factory workers and cultivators in 1963–1964 asked the following:

> Apni Nijeke pradhanata ki mane karen?

1. Pakistani? Naki?
2. Banagali? Naki?
3. (name of the district) er bashinda? Naki?
4. (name of the village) er bashinda?

> [Do you consider yourself first and foremost a:

1. Pakistani?
2. Bengali?
3. A man from [insert respondent's district of origin]? Or
4. A man from [insert respondent's village of origin]?]

The survey revealed that 48 percent of the respondents considered themselves Pakistani, 11 percent Bengali, 17 percent identified with their districts and 25 percent identified with their

villages. The author concludes that even in the early 1960s the sense of Bengali identity was not a widespread form of identity for the average 'man in the street' and the 'man in the field' (Schuman, 1972, p.291). It is important to deal with the puzzle that, less than a decade before the birth of a full-scale nationalist movement, nearly half the respondents identified themselves as Pakistani. And what would explain the conversion to a Bengali identity in such a short period of time?

Most nationalist historians – with the notable exception of Anisuzzaman – tend to downplay the ideological anchors of Pakistani ideology among a section of the Bengali intellectuals. Pakistan did not stand on an ideological void. There was some evidence of successful ideological work as a number of writers declared their support for Pakistan and did not see any problem or paradox in assuming Pakistani identity. True, some of these writers eventually shifted their ideological and political position, and their loyalty to Pakistani nationalism wavered. However, the fact that they retained a Pakistani identity and became the ideological foot soldiers of Pakistan for a period is a credit that cannot be denied to the leaders of Pakistani nationalism.

For most of the Muslim writers, the demand for Pakistan seemed to promise a greater opportunity to play the role of a Muslim as well as a Bengali writer. As Muslims they could not reach out to the larger community because they were limited by their linguistic skills; they also sought a space for themselves free from the competition of Hindu writers. According to Anisuzzaman, 'Two literary organizations grew up in 1942 to lend support to the Pakistan movement: the Purba Pakistan Sahitya Sangsad in Dacca (Dhaka) and the Purba Pakistan Renesa Society in Calcutta (Kolkata)' (Anisuzzaman, 1993, p.95). In Chittagong the chair of a literary meeting averred that 'I was a Bengali and now I am a Pakistani' (Anisuzzaman, 1993). The chair was Maulavi Abdur Rahman, a writer from Chittagong (whose son, Professor Nurul Islam, was the head of the first Planning Commission of Bangladesh; personal communication with Anisuzzaman, 2014).

The concept of nation has grown from a more exclusive category to become more inclusive. For Montesquieu in the mid eighteenth century, the nation was equivalent to the nobility and the clergy. In Hungary and Poland, the term nation applied to the aristocracy alone. The label 'nationalists' applied to the rising middle-class intellectuals. Miroslav Hroch, writing in the context of Eastern Europe, developed a three-stage schema of the growth of nationalism having originated among intellectuals, which was fostered by political agitators and activists who in turn communicated it to the mass of the population (Smith, 2011, p.225).

The emergence of Bengali nationalism followed a similar trajectory. First, it was the intellectuals, poets, playwrights and Dhaka University intellectuals who issued the call of nationalism. Most commentators would agree that it was cultural nationalism that preceded political nationalism. The attack on Bengali culture was manifested in the ban imposed on playing Tagore songs. Begum Sufia Kamal organized a protest against Ayub Khan in 1961, when a ban on Tagore songs was imposed. Before 1961, celebration of Pahela Baiskhak was not a big event, but after 1961 Chayyanot started organizing the performance of Tagore songs at Ramna Park (Uddin, 2006). Commemoration of Ekushey was also expanded after 1961. Chayyanot became a citadel of resistance in the early 1960s.

In fact, it was cultural nationalism, reinforced by the call for economic nationalism, that infused political nationalism in Bangladesh. In concrete historical terms, it was the language movement that inculcated the spirit of autonomy of language and culture. Now in hindsight many commentators, often toeing the line of official narrative, draw a single unilinear trajectory. But the demand to include Bangla as an official language was a demand for granting the Bengali language the status of *one of the official languages* in the context of Pakistan.

The intellectuals affiliated with Dhaka University were mainly responsible for formulating a two-economy thesis and proposed remedies in a proposition of economic nationalism. Economists such as Nurul Islam, Rehman Sobhan, Anisul Islam *et al.* worked with the Pakistan Institute for Development, focusing on economic plans for the newly independent Pakistan, and were able to identify the exploitative relationship between the jute-dominated East Pakistan and West Pakistan. First the two-economy formula came out of the pens of these economists, which eventually sowed the seeds of political nationalism. The publication of the weekly *Forum* by Rehman Sobhan, with Hamida Hossain as the executive editor and Kamal Hossain as the publisher, played a crucial role in the recruitment of a small number of intellectuals in the service of Bengali nationalism. Certainly, the magazine, with its powerful and inspiring contents, had a small readership but those who read, patronized or became involved with the group had a role in disseminating the idea of autonomy and incipient nationalism. While the English-language weekly *Forum* and other English-language newspapers reached out to a small number of intellectuals in the then East Pakistan, the Bengali intellectuals, despite attempts to co-opt them under the rubric of an Islamicized Bangla language and culture, started expressing their nationalist sentiments.

Neville Maxwell perceptively pointed out that 'Pakistan was pregnant with Bangla Desh from the moment of its own birth. Labor was brought on unexpectedly by the decline of Ayub … and birth was achieved by Caesarian section', with India 'acting as the scalpel' (Maxwell, 1972). In his review article, Maxwell summarized Loshak, who argued that

> Pakistan was 'doomed from the start' because in a real sense it was never a nation at all. Bengali nationalism, the sense of ethnic and historical identity of the population of what was East Pakistan, was from the beginning a far stronger force than the sense of Pakistani [italicized in the original] identity. It was already clearly developed by the end of the 1950s, and looked, as early as that, to separation and establishment of a sovereign Bengal; through the 1960s it grew, fed by resentment at the disparity in economic and political advantage that left East Pakistan the poor sister, steadily and irremediably becoming poorer, notwithstanding the fact that its jute exports contributed largely to Pakistan's foreign exchange earnings. [The issue of channeling foreign exchanges on an equitable basis was one of the planks of] the Awami League's six-point demand for regional autonomy. Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, the Awami League leader, and his associates used to deny that the six points were a secessionist program, but while 'it might call for mere autonomy, and not spell out secession,' it was always plain – or should have been – that 'secession would be its effect.'
>
> *(Maxwell, 1972)*

For David Loshak,

> the paradox was this: while the six-point formula went far beyond what West Pakistan could conceivably grant, it was the least that East Pakistan could demand. The formula, in short, succinctly implied the fundamental irreconcilability of the two wings of Pakistan.
>
> *(Loshak, 1971, quoted in Maxwell, 1972)*

While differences in ethnicity and historical memories separated the Bengalis from the West Pakistanis, political and economic disparity bred resentment among the Bengali intelligentsia.

Bengali representation in the national bureaucracy remained extremely low. According to one estimate by the influential newspaper *Dawn*,

> nine years after the creation of Pakistan, only 51 top level policy-making positions were occupied by Bengalis in the Central Secretariat out of a total of 741 such positions. Bengali representation in the army was minimal – 98 percent of the officer corps of the army, navy, and air force was composed of West Pakistanis.
>
> *(Dawn, January 9 and 18, 1956, quoted in Islam, 1981, p.63)*

The construction of Muslim identity can also be seen as a devious ploy of the colonial administration. The partition of Bengal in 1905, mainly along religious lines, was done ostensibly to advantage the economically and politically weaker, but numerically larger, Muslim community of Bengal. The partition was disputed both by the Hindus and by a section of the Muslims in Bengal who saw in it a cynical manifestation of a 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial rulers. The partition was annulled in 1911 in the face of the growing resistance of the middle-class elites. During the years of divided Bengal, the Muslim League was formed in Dhaka, the capital of East Bengal in 1906, and a provision for a separate Muslim electorate was legislated in 1909. The annulment created resentment among the Muslims and helped form a constituency that was receptive to Jinnah's 'two-nation theory', which was the basis for the creation of Pakistan in succeeding decades.

At the All India Muslim League Conference in 1940, Jinnah articulated his 'two-nation theory' as follows: 'The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophy, social customs, literatures. They neither intermarry, nor dine together, and they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions' (quoted in Islam, 1981, p.55). 'In a surprisingly short time, the Muslim League was able to mobilize the Muslim masses behind the slogan of Pakistan – a homeland for Muslims where they would be able to organize their lives according to Islamic ideology' (Islam, 1981, p.56). This was remarkable in the face of the ulamas who never really supported the cause of Muslim nationalism, as they did not believe in the symbolic use of Islam, as did the non-religious elites (Islam, 1981, p.59). During the last phase of the campaign for the freedom of Pakistan, the Muslim League leadership tried to co-opt some ulema and pirsto leadership positions; after failing to do that, they conferred the religious titles on the ordinary landlords, thus giving them the pretense of being spiritual and religious leaders. Mr. Jinnah 'always appeared in public meetings dressed in a sherwani' (Islam, 1981, p.57).

Although the creation of Pakistan cannot be dismissed as either an accident of history or the manipulation of self-serving Muslim elites, it provided an excellent example of a constructed nation. It showed that construction is not pure fabrication. There had to be some basis in the material and ideological circumstances historically formed that could be used by the leaders of the nationalist movements. With the help of hindsight, one could agree with Jinnah's detailed description of the differences between Hindus and Muslims, and then one could ask 'So what?' The two major religious communities lived in India for centuries with a remarkable absence of conflict and animosity. Differences between the two communities remained unproblematic until the political need for differentiation arose. It was only in the fervor of nation construction that differences were problematized and politicized; minor differences were accentuated and amplified and substantive areas of cooperation forgotten. The invention of a nation relies on both remembering and amnesia.

Yet, soon after the creation of Pakistan, supposedly a homeland and sanctuary for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, its founder, downplayed the religious theme. In his speech as the first president of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, he declared:

> You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or
> to any other places of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion,
> caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state.
>
> *(Quoted in Ahmed, 1990, p.19)*

However, Pakistan as a nation-state was divided geographically – with two parts separated by 1,200 miles of Indian territory, it had to use common religion as the basis for nationhood. The movement for autonomy in the eastern part of Pakistan led to the emergence of Bengali nationalism, which underlined language rather than religion as the basis of nationhood. The long-standing linguistic identity was an essential ingredient in the formation of national identity in Bangladesh. Philosophers such as Herder, who maintained that 'every language has its definite national character' (quoted in Kohn, 1951, p.432), recognized the importance of language as a basis of nationality.

Both language and secularism became justifications for a separate identity for the inhabitants of Bangladesh from its very inception. Bangladesh emerged as a nation on four cardinal principles, which were enshrined in the constitution. Nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism were the four pillars on which Bangladesh stood. However, the political turn of events that led to the tragic *coup d'état* in August 1975 dislodged not only the rule of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of the country, but also took the country toward a path of religious orthodoxy. Bengali nationalism based on ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity was redefined after the 1975 coup on the basis of political calculations (Murshid, 2001). Not that the new rulers were any more religious than the ones they replaced, but in order to show that they were different, they began to pose themselves as the custodians of religion. Since 1975, the country has clearly drifted toward Islam. This coincided with the global resurgence of Islam. Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh was also supported by the funds received from the Gulf states that began to establish links with various religiously affiliated political parties in Bangladesh.

The shift in the nomenclature from Bengali nationalism to Bangladeshi nationalism was justified by the post-1975 regimes as more integrative because it would include the Hill peoples of Bangladesh who do not see themselves as Bengalis. However, Mohsin argues that there are two meanings of 'Bangladeshi nationalism'; one meaning is integrative to include the Hill people. Manabendra Larma raised this issue in the parliament in 1972. The post-1975 call for Bangladeshi nationalism 'was in essence a reassertion of the Muslim identity of the Bengalis in Bangladesh'. This 'deepened the division between the Hill people and the Bengalis; now religion as well as culture were being used as tools of domination' of the Hill people (Mohsin, 2013, p.333).

There are a number of features that need serious consideration in explaining the growing influence of Islam in Bangladesh. The most important of these has been the growth of Islamic national education, locally known as madrasa education. In 1994, there were 5,762 madrasas in Bangladesh, with a student population of 1.7 million. Compared to 4.8 million secondary school students in the same year, the figure may not be as overwhelming as it looks; still, it is a number to be reckoned with.

The Islamic Party won more than 12 percent of the vote in the election of 1991. In 1996, they won only 3 percent of the vote. This is not an indication of their declining popularity, however. In the latest election of October 2001, the share of the vote won by the Islamic parties is hard to ascertain because as an electoral strategy they formed an alliance with the BNP, which assured the BNP a resounding electoral victory. Rather, one can see in it an acceptance of Islamic trappings in the political establishment. Clearly, a desecularization process has been taking place in Bangladesh. For example, it has become routine for newly elected prime ministers to perform

a Hajj before taking over the new government. The process toward desecularization, or, for that matter, secularization, is not irreversible. The process is very much linked to the politics of the day. One political scientist who conducted a content analysis of the speeches of Khaleda Zia, the then prime minister (2003) and leader of the BNP, reported that she began every speech with '*Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim*' ('In the name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Merciful'). In most of her speeches, Khaleda Zia upheld the Islamic provisions incorporated in the constitution during the rule of Ziaur Rahman, namely by insertion of '*Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim*', dispensing with secularism and substituting instead 'absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah' (Maniruzzaman, 1992, p.209). Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the Awami League, in her speeches accused both Zia and Ershad of rigging the elections and using Islam to increase their appeal to the people. Sheikh Hasina, in contrast, promised a living, secular democracy (Maniruzzaman, 1992, p.210). Jamaat-e-Islami promised to build an Islamic state strictly on the basis of the Quran and Sunnah. Its stance was anti-Indian and it attacked the Awami League for the latter's secularism. 'The secularists and the leftists were badly defeated by parties who espoused various levels of Islamic orientation' (Maniruzzaman, 1992, p.211).

The turn to religion in Bangladesh should be seen as a progressive erosion of traditional '*adat*' religion, as it is called in Indonesia, toward a more puritan Islam (Khondker, 2006). The rise of modernist forms of Islam had a 'dramatic impact on these traditional locally based religious forms' (Rozario and Samuel, 2010, p.356). Both the major parties in Bangladesh, the Awami League and the BNP, have made 'concessions towards the Islamists, but the population as a whole shows little willingness to move dramatically in its direction, either in the villages or the cities' (Rozario and Samuel, 2010, p.356). It is easy to agree with the first part of the sentence and recognize the irony. It is understandable when the Islamist-leaning BNP joins hands with Islamic political parties or social movements, but the tilt – albeit symbolic – on the part of the Awami League, a putative secularist party, to the religious right can be explained either as part of the overall swing toward Islamicization of the society or as an extreme Machiavellian ploy by the Awami League leadership.

Even to a casual observer, the telltale signs of public piety in the urban centers of Bangladesh are impossible to overlook. There are several indicators of the growth of public piety in Bangladesh, a trend that is present in other Muslim-majority societies such as Pakistan and Egypt (Mahmood, 2004). The number of Quran reading groups has also risen as an urban phenomenon, with a number of educated women joining these groups in Bangladesh (Huq and Rashid, 2008). Meanwhile, during the same period, women have also gained substantially in terms of role transformation. The presence of women in the civil service, police and military indicate their growing public visibility and empowerment. Both processes work side by side in Bangladesh.

Concluding reflections

Secularism was once believed to be a process of desacralization that emerged *pari passu* with modernization. The standard – and historically flawed – view of secularization since Bryan Wilson is now defunct. A whole new literature since the sociological critique of Robert Bellah, Roland Robertson, Peter Berger, Bryan Turner and the recent philosophical reflections of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad and Jose Casanova *et al.*, force us to view secularism in a more nuanced way. This is in addition to the variety of political meanings of secularism – from the French *laïcité* to the US model of religion-friendly secularism. The mainstream Bangladesh society has now accepted a more US-style secularism – contrary to Turkish or French models of secularism.

The chances of the spread of fundamentalism in Bangladesh may be remote, as are the possibilities of a return to a secular society as it existed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The poverty and backwardness in Bangladesh, measured in conventional socio-economic indicators, should not be used as an excuse to deny its rich cultural tradition of secularism, which was more the product of local traditions, a combination of religious syncretism and cultural mysticism, than an imposition from outside. One of the errors in the perception of the Western media is to look for a particular brand of (Western) secularism in every corner of the world without any regard for cultural and historical diversities. If we take the issue of specificity of Bangladeshi culture seriously, the emergence of either an Iran under Khomeini or Afghanistan under Taliban-style Islamic revolution or a West European secularizing trend are equally unlikely.

When a religion is viewed more in terms of religious practices than of some invariable and fixed doctrines, it becomes complicated; it ceases to be a nominal category and becomes an ordinal variable. Religion may be universal but religiosity varies across cultures around the world. Religiosity is often a personal choice – then juxtaposition of personal, private religion and public piety, on the one hand, and the symbolic use of religion in the public sphere, on the other, are factors that complicate and complexify simple-minded categorizations of religious versus non-religious with profound implications for the discussion of politics, especially the subject of national identity in Bangladesh.

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