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Nationalism and the ‘politics of national identity’

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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.

\textit{(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-Marxist 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
Nationalism and the ‘politics of national identity’

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 Baisakh was not a big event, but after 1961 Chayanot started organizing the performance of Tagore songs at Ramna Park (Uddin, 2006). Commemoration of Ekushey was also expanded after 1961. Chayanot 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.


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
Nationalism and the ‘politics of national identity’

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.

References


