

The Resilience of Secularism in Bangladesh

Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury*

With a spiritual commitment to Islam and a cultural affiliation to being Bengali, Bangladesh is a nation where the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Founded on secular principles, Bangladesh has been heralded by the western world as an example of a model Muslim country, but whose people have taken great pride in its unique syncretic nature. In fact, ethno-nationalism conflicting with Islamic religious nationalism was the very embodiment of the creation of Bangladesh.

Although there have been occasional drifts towards religious extremism, the secular character of Bangladesh has rarely been threatened seriously. Despite many attempts, it has proven to be an unlikely breeding ground for radical Islamist groups. The original Constitution of Bangladesh was secular in content. But, after Bangladesh's leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in 1975, successive governments chipped away at the secular edifice of the Constitution, and made the country more Islamic. Secularism was removed from the Constitution in 1977 by the Fifth Amendment of the constitution by Ziaur Rahman, and Islam was declared as the state religion in 1988 by Muhammad Ershad. However, the concept of secularism was reinstated when, in its 2010 landmark decision, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh scrapped the bulk of the Fifth Amendment, which had allowed religion-based politics to flourish in Bangladesh ever since. By making religion based political activities a punishable offence in 2010, Bangladesh's Supreme Court ensured that secularism remains a cornerstone of the Constitution. The Election Commission of Bangladesh subsequently demanded the religion-based parties in the country to amend their charters as they conflicted with the supreme law of the land.

Sheikh Hasina's regime adopted further steps to strengthen the secular aspects of the constitution and has endeavoured to give non-Muslims a sense of belonging by rephrasing certain provisions of the Constitution. In place of the Article 2A that reads: "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but

***The Author**, Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury is the Diplomatic Editor, *The Economic Times*, New Delhi. (This article was received from the author on March 07, 2021)

other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic”, the amended Constitution reads: “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.” The Awami League regime, during Hasina’s second term (2009–2014), opened a new chapter in her governance by omitting Article 25(2) which had underlined the consolidation, preservation, and strengthening of fraternal relations among the Muslim countries.

While the Islamisation of a certain section of Bangladeshi society has dominated the headlines, secularism as a sustainable common platform has always withstood these challenges. Bangladesh has a highly sophisticated civil society, and a strong religion-cultural tradition grounded in a secular political platform. The world’s third largest Muslim country, Bangladesh marks a crucial departure from the trend amongst some other Muslim countries in South and Southeast Asia where an Islamist agenda has become more apparent or prominent. In the case of Bangladesh, Islamist militancy has failed to take root, and the country’s secular state and civil society has indeed retained its strength and resilience. Muslim nationalism - which was the basis for the establishment of Pakistan - tried to rear its head in Bangladesh during the turbulent years from 2001 to 2006.

During this period, Bangladesh was swept by a wave of radical ideology that triggered considerable media and academic concern that the country would fall prey to Islamist forces. The extremism that it experienced during those years was largely the result of an ideology and tactics brought back into Bangladesh by returnees of the Afghan war in the 1980s. Those returnees believed that the radical Islamist ideology they encountered (and imbibed) in Afghanistan could be transplanted into the Muslim community of Bangladesh. They tried to radicalise contemporary Bangladeshi society and politics, competing against Bengali ethnicity, language, culture, and secularism (‘Bengali nationalism’). This was a serious miscalculation. The relative ease with which the current Bangladesh government’s anti-terrorism campaign crushed this outbreak of Islamist militancy has demonstrated how seriously the militants misunderstood Islam in the Bangladesh context - a context in which Islam is intimately interwoven with deeper traditions of tolerance and secularism in that culture.

Incidents of extremism and terrorism witnessed a sharp increase in Bangladesh between 2001 and 2006. Most of the attacks were directed against religious minorities, secular intellectuals, and journalists as well as against politicians belonging to secular parties and leftist activists. Islamist extremists,

with the backing of Jamaat-e-Islami, sought to impose an Islamic way of life on people in the rural areas, often through the use of force. Women were coerced into veiling themselves, and men were forced to grow beards and wear skull caps. Many who defied these rules were tortured and killed. Cultural groups and cinema were targeted as well. Bangladesh's secular tradition was under severe threat from the rise in fundamentalism until Sheikh Hasina returned to power and upheld the principles of secularism.

After Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, the Mujibur Rehman government banned all political activities of the Jamaat-e-Islami Party. However, Zia-ur-Rehman responded by establishing the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In an effort to establish itself as a viable political organisation, the BNP gave amnesty to the Jamaat-e-Islami, and permitted them to revive their political activities. But, in a subsequent upheaval, the BNP itself lost power to a military dictator. The Jamaat, nevertheless, continued to flourish during the nine years of dictatorial rule that followed during the 1980s, giving birth to a generation of radical activists.

Islamist groups in Bangladesh flourished with vast financial donations from abroad. They set up hundreds of madrassas (religious schools) in the country, which they have been using as recruitment centres for fundamentalist ideas. What made the situation alarming in Bangladesh was that the Jamaat and its allies penetrated the higher ranks of the armed forces during the military rule, and later during the BNP rule. During its political-power tenures, the Bangladesh army drew heavily on the support of Islamic fundamentalist parties to win over the masses.

During Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's first stint at the helm in the first half of the 1990s, the Jamaat and other fundamentalist outfits were given almost free rein. Over the years, the Jamaat set up thousands of madrassas in Bangladesh, many of which are known to recruit and train radicals and jihadi fighters. In 2001, Khaleda Zia returned to power for the second time on an essentially anti-India platform. In addition to political compulsions to keep her fundamentalist partners in the coalition government happy, Begum Zia's inadequate response against terrorists was prompted by her intense political rivalry and sense of insecurity. The BNP has always viewed its fundamentalist friends as useful weapons to keep the Awami League in check.

Islamist extremists in Bangladesh during Khaleda Zia government, maintained operational linkages with foreign extremist and terrorist groups. According to reports, extremists from the Jemaah Islamia - which is connected to the Al Qaeda and seeks to set up an Islamic State encompassing Malaysia,

Singapore, Indonesia and southern Philippines - once operated out of camps in Bangladesh. The results of the 2008 elections brought an end to the freedom that these terrorists enjoyed as the Hasina regime cracked down on terror groups, as well as the insurgent groups targeting India and operating out of Bangladesh, and brought to justice the perpetrators who had derailed secular ethos in 1975 through the gruesome killing of Bangabandhu Mujibur Rehman. The fugitives were a blot on the character on the national identity of Bangladesh.

Coinciding with the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East, Bangladesh also witnessed an escalation of deadly attacks on secular activists. Throughout this period, members of Bangladesh's vibrant civil society, including publishers, bloggers, and media personnel, continued to receive death threats. Like in other theatres, violence as a political tactic was used by Islamist parties and groups in Bangladesh to silence dissent. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), encouraged the forces responsible for the radicalisation, and legitimised violence as a political tactic to silences critics and opponents. The new Islamic identity took hold in at least some segments of society - evident in the effectiveness of the Islamists casting Shahbag protesters in 2013 as "atheists", and their agenda as being "anti-Islam," thus conflating successfully three concepts: secularism, atheism, and anti-Islamism.

Islamists try to disperse a discourse in which the rallying call is that "Islam is under attack", or that "secularism equals atheism equals anti-Islamism". And, within this, they try to delegitimise and dehumanise outspoken secularists. This discourse is completely distinct from the traditional understandings of Islam in Bangladesh, and appeals to a very narrow audience. Consequently, the vast majority of Bangladeshis are held hostage by a small number of domestic violent networks, some of whom have links with the global dynamics of transnational Islamist activism.

The current administration has taken some robust measures against Islamist outfits, especially in response to the recent targeting of the blogger community. It has taken laudable measures in countering Islamist forces, and pushed for the War Crimes Tribunal in which the defendants come from the Islamist ranks.

Bangladesh is a paradox that Pakistan failed to understand during the 24 years that the country formed its eastern wing. Bangladeshis from all sections of society fast during Ramzan but also celebrate Pujo; they visit the mosque and sing Rabindra sangeet, seeing no contradiction between the two activities,

and indeed, there need not be any. Addressing a function during her visit to the Durga Puja Mandap at the Ramkrishna Mission, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, “Bangladesh is a secular state and we all, irrespective of religion, caste and creed, are moving together along the same road. We all are celebrating festivals including religious ones together which is the best achievement for us.” This embodies the essentially secular spirit of Bangladesh as a nation.

The Bangladesh Awami League government’s slogan, “*Dhormo Jaar Jaar, Utsob Shobar* (Religion as per one’s own, but festivals common to all)”, portrays the nation’s secular face. The sentiment is being implemented on the ground, with people of the Hindu community taking charge of security of Eidgahs during Eid prayers, and Muslim youths guarding the Puja Mandaps during prayers. *Poila Boishakh*, which marks the first day of the new year according to the Bengali calendar, is observed by Bengalis in Bangladesh irrespective of their religion. Celebrated across Bangladesh with splendour and revelry, the festivities on the occasion are an affirmation of Bengali culture that transcends religion, and a fitting reply to radical Islamists and their designs.

Bangladesh has a history of linguistic nationalism triumphing over religious nationalism. This has acted as a deterrent against the rising tide of extremism. There is still a strong Bengali culture that Bangladeshi Muslims and Hindus share. This has acted as a brake against the rising tide of extremism.

Thus, in any political rhetoric and history, it can never be forgotten that the war in 1971 was formally articulated in terms of a struggle for a secular state based on the existence of a unified Bengali cultural identity that superseded religious identity. A competitive democratic system of politics, which accommodates aspects of secularism, language, Muslim identity, and Islamic ethical-moral codes, continues to be retained in political discourse for forming and consolidating the multi-racial, multi-religious national identity of Bangladesh as a sovereign state. Given the fast changing geo-political and geo-strategic environment, the nature of the common challenges faced by the two countries are also undergoing changes. This requires the two countries to strengthen their cooperation further, and address whatever potential irritants are left.

