

Review

# Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh: Contesting the Dominant Narratives

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**Abstract:** Since late 2000s, the political landscape in Bangladesh moved from democracy to an authoritarian kleptocracy, and experienced a new set of political and social narratives. This paper aims to contest some of these dominant/official narratives which have been discursively constructed and promoted by the secularist parties (including the ruling regime) and groups in Bangladesh over recent years. Examining the sociopolitical and historical facts and figures of the country, we have identified five major contested narratives related to (a) Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan, (b) foundational ideology of Bangladesh's war of liberation, (c) state-sponsored Islamization in Bangladesh, (d) pro-liberation and anti-liberation dichotomy, and (e) war crimes trial. Drawing on a robust content analysis of the credible secondary sources substantiated by qualitative interviews, we have examined these dominant narratives and found that they are not supported by historical evidence and popular mandate, yet have been constructed largely to support and legitimize the current authoritarian regime. The paper offers both counter-narratives and some pragmatic policy recommendations to elude increasing polarization and sociopolitical instability and foster a peaceful democratic society in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Islam; secularism; Bangladesh; Bengali nationalism; political narratives

## 1. Introduction

“Islam” is an Arabic word which means submission, surrender and obedience. The other literal meaning of the word “Islam” is peace. As a religion, Islam, therefore, refers to as the achievement of peace through submission and obedience to God (Ahmad 2010). The Oxford Dictionary of English defines Islam as “the religion of the Muslims, a monotheistic faith regarded as revealed through Muhammad as the Prophet of Allah” (Stevenson 2010, p. 926). Long before the Muslim conquest of Bengal in the beginning of the thirteenth century by Turkish conqueror Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad bin Bakhtyar Khalji, Islam came to Bengal through the benevolent efforts of the Sufis, saints, and merchants (Rahim 1963; Khan 2013). However, the political victory of the Muslims made a significant contribution to the spread of Islam in Bengal. The Muslim rulers invariably patronized the Muslim missionaries, scholars, and Sufis in different manners. They built numerous mosques, *madradas* and *khanqas* which played a major role in proselytizing efforts and building a vibrant Muslim society in the country (Karim 1959).

There are four major Islamization theories in Bengal such as the ‘religion of the sword thesis,’ ‘immigration theory,’ ‘religion of patronage doctrine,’ and the ‘religion of social liberation theory.’ Scholars such as Muir (1963), Chatterji (1963) and Majumdar (1973) emphasized the forced conversion theory, while others such as Habibullah (1945), Karim (1959), Qureshi (1962), Rahim (1963) and Haq (1975) stressed the social liberation theory regarding Islamization in Bengal. Wise (1894)

argues that both sword and social liberation played most part in wide range of conversion to Islam in Bengal. However, [Arnold \(1913\)](#) rejected the force theory and emphasized the social liberation theory that postulates peaceful conversion of the Hindus and Buddhists into Islam by the efforts of the Sufis and saints of Islam. [Ahmad \(1964\)](#), [Tarafdar \(1965\)](#), [Nizami \(1966\)](#), [Mujeeb \(1967\)](#) and [Rashid \(1969\)](#) also argue that the Sufis were the prime agents in the conversion to Islam of a large segment of India's Hindu population, especially Hindus of lower castes. However, Bengal Muslim elites such as Abu A. Ghuznavi and Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee rejected the lower-caste Hindus conversion discourse and advanced the idea of large-scale Muslim immigration that, according to them, was responsible for the legion of the Muslims in Bengal ([Eaton 1993](#)). The dominant view suggests that the social liberation, immigration, and patronage theories are most appropriate to explain the spread and consolidation of Islam in Bengal and particularly East Bengal which is now Bangladesh.

Islam and politics are inextricably interrelated and intertwined. The amalgamation of Islam with politics, which is in other words called Islamism or political Islam, has been a characteristic feature of Muslim society since the dawn of Islam's culture and civilization. By the seventeenth century, Islam took a solid ground in Bangladesh largely through Arab traders, the Sufis, and saints. Simultaneously, political Islam also gained momentum in the society. However, its nature and manifestation have not been same throughout the ages. During the colonial period, three major historical events such as the *Fara'idi* movement and the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya* movement both in the 1820s led by Haji Shari'at Allah (1781–1840) and Mir Nisar Ali alias Titu Mir (1782–1831) respectively, and the Khilafat movement between the late 1910s and early 1920s (1918–1924) by the Indian as well as Bengali *ulama* (religious scholars) marked the rise of political Islam in Bengal. Shari'at Allah's and Titu Mir's movements were more puritanical than political. The Wahhabi movement and the puritanical ideas of India's great Muslim scholar Shah Wali Allah Dahlawi (1703–1762) massively influenced these two Bengal peasant movements ([Geaves 1996](#)). Almost a century later, the Khilafat movement, which aimed to preserve the Ottoman Empire and the then symbolic caliphate system in the post-World War I, reinforced political Islam in Bengal. Like Shari'at Allah's and Titu Mir's reform movements, the pan-Islamic Khilafat movement also met with failure. However, all these movements made profound impacts on the sociopolitical and cultural landscapes of the Bengal Muslim society.

During the 1930s, in India, the anti-colonial movement began to rise vigorously, and simultaneously Muslim religious nationalism reflected in the demand for a separate homeland for Indian Muslims emerged strongly. The 'two nation theory', advocated by Jinnah and popularized and advanced by Muslim League, eventually resulted in the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 ([Cohen 2004](#)). Bangladesh became the eastern part of Pakistan. Soon after the independence of Pakistan, religious nationalism took the back seat and instead Bengali ethnic nationalism began to grow in East Pakistan. The suppression of the Bengali's demand for incorporating Bengali as a national language of Pakistan which culminated in the language movement in East Pakistan paved the way for the emergence of the Bengali nationalist movement undermining religious nationalism. The establishment of the Awami Muslim League in 1949 (in 1955, the party dropped the word "Muslim" from its name and turned Awami League) was perhaps the first attempt to institutionalize the Bengali ethno-centric nationalist movement ([Nair 1990](#)). The victory of the language movement in 1952, the victory of the United Front, a coalition of the Bengali nationalist parties, in the 1954 East Pakistan Provincial Assembly Elections, the movement for autonomy for East Pakistan in the 1960s, and finally the landslide victory of the Awami League in 1970 national elections culminated in the war of independence leading to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after the independence turned into a secular state. The constitution of 1972 placed secularism as a guiding principle of the state along with democracy, nationalism, and socialism ([Jahan 1973](#)). These four state principles were claimed by Mujib as his ideals and were widely called as *Mujibbad* (Mujibism) ([Huq 1973](#)). The Mujib regime was, however, removed by a group of army officers followed by a series of coups and counter-coups between August and November 1975 ([Maniruzzaman 1976](#)). Khandker Mushtaq Ahmed, a senior

Awami League leader and an influential member of Mujib's cabinet, replaced Mujib until General Ziaur Rahman emerged as the de facto ruler in 1976. Zia removed secularism and emphasized Islamic ideology by amending the constitution (Ahamed 1983). Zia was also assassinated in an abortive coup in May 1981 (Khan 1982). Justice Abdus Sattar succeeded Zia through a democratic election in November 1981 (Alam 1993a). However, after a few months of Sattar's civilian rule, General H. M. Ershad, the then army chief, usurped power through a bloodless coup in March 1982 (Rahman 1983). Ershad incorporated Islam as the state religion in the constitution and made Islam as the guiding principle of his rule (Riaz 2004). In December 1990, Ershad's regime collapsed in the wake of strong and popular mass movements and Bangladesh entered a new phase of democratic/constitutional governance (Baxter 1992). Since the reemergence of democracy in the early 1990s, the country has been alternately governed by two main parties—Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Zia, and Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujib—with a brief hiatus of a military-backed caretaker government. Khaleda's regime (mainly two terms, one from 1991 to 1996, and the other from 2001 to 2006) demonstrated the pale imitation of Zia's policy and tactic of Islamization and frequent stress of Islamic symbolism (Shehabuddin 2008). The first term of Hasina's regime (1996–2001) demonstrated no inclination towards secularism and opposition to Islamization. However, the second term (2009–2014), in coalition with the leftist parties, witnessed a major shift in its governance style—from acceptance of Islamization towards the process of secularization. The regime restored secularism as a state ideology, however, paradoxically retained Islamic phrase and provision of state religion in the constitution (Salehin 2013). Driven by the ideology of secularism, the regime is reported to have been so desperate to “de-Islamize Bangladesh” that some scholars have marked it as an emergence of “ultra-secularism”, “violent secularism”, or “authoritarian secularism” (Islam 2011a).

The dominant political narratives, which have been officially constructed quite discursively, largely surrounding the Bangladesh's war of liberation, continue to polarize the Bangladeshis by and large. The proponents consciously divide the nation for larger political mileage by culturing these narratives at social, political, and intellectual levels. Although Bangladesh is almost a homogeneous society, polarization in politics, society, and culture is perhaps more acute today than in supposedly an explicitly heterogeneous society. The hegemonic political narratives have a major role in such polarization. This paper attempts to contest these narratives and provide the competing narratives corroborated by sociopolitical and historical facts.

Following this brief introduction, the paper in the second section highlights the methodology of this study. The third section, by providing a taxonomy, discusses five major dominant and competing political narratives in Bangladesh. The sub-sections under this section will provide this discussion. The fourth section outlines the rise of assertive secularism in the country. The paper in the final section presents concluding remarks and offers some pragmatic policy recommendations to elude increasing polarization and attain sociopolitical integration and sustainable development which are essential for establishing a peaceful democratic society in Bangladesh.

## 2. Methodology

In this study, we have employed the content analysis of credible secondary sources and substantiated them with intensive qualitative interviews. The content analysis—a robust examination of relevant materials—includes credible journal articles, books, newspaper articles, and Internet documents. Content analysis is significant because there is an enormous body of literature dealing with Islam, politics, and secularism in Bangladesh. To thoroughly understand the subject matters, we needed to make a robust historical survey of this literature. We also interviewed eight individuals from different professional groups such as intellectuals, politicians, journalists, and Islamist scholars in Bangladesh. These interviews were conducted between April and July 2014. The interviewees included Dr. Kamal Hossain, a senior lawyer of the Supreme Court and the principal author of the Constitution of Bangladesh; Dr. Akbar Ali Khan, former Cabinet Secretary of Bangladesh Government

and a former advisor of a Caretaker Government; Dr. Asif Nazrul, a Law Professor of Dhaka University and a public scholar; Nurul Kabir, Editor of *The New Age* (a leading English daily at Dhaka); Maeenuddin Khan Badal MP, Executive President of a faction of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (National Socialist Party—JSD); Shah Abdul Hannan, an Islamic philosopher and a BJI (Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami)-aligned intellectual; Abul Asad, Editor of the Daily *Sangram* (a BJI-aligned national daily); and Habibun Nabi Khan Sohel, a central leader of BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party, currently the main opposition party). These people are regularly following the nature and essence of the politics of Bangladesh. A few of them were directly involved in the Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan, the war of liberation in 1971, and the constitution-making processes in post-independent Bangladesh. A section of them is still involved in the national politics of the country. For our study, we needed to learn their insights on the subject matters. Beyond this, we visited several research institutes such as BIIT (Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought), IFB (Islamic Foundation Bangladesh), and ASB (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh) for collecting secondary data. Taken as a whole, we employed a robust methodology to generate data for our analysis.

### 3. The Dominant and Competing Political Narratives in Bangladesh

The dominant/official political narratives in Bangladesh have been discursively constructed, massively castigated, and brutally reinforced through various state machineries and their ancillaries to generate legitimacy for the current authoritarian secular state, and to uproot political opposition. In the name of teaching “true” history of the nation, the current ruling regime has arbitrarily constructed these narratives and attempted to indoctrinate the masses through schooling and state-controlled mass media. The exploration of these dominant/official narratives is significant on several grounds. First, these dominant narratives do not ironically reflect the social and cultural reality of the nation and are not supported by historical and political facts. Second, the narratives have been acting as an “ideological guise” to legitimize the “secular authoritarianism” and oppose political pluralism denying people’s democratic and human rights. Third, the dominant narratives have created “a climate of fear” in society so that nobody would dare to show any opposition to the current ruling regime and thus it could perpetuate its power. Fourth, the narratives have adopted a “selective democracy” as well as “selective humanity” approach in which a particular segment of people who are supportive of these narratives and the regime get undue privileges and immunity of corruption charges from the state, while the rest largely become either victims or marginalized. Fifth, the dominant secular narratives have arbitrarily and instrumentally divided the nation and produced a dangerous culture of enmity, hatred and revenge within the society adversely affecting the sociopolitical and cultural fabric of the society. Finally, these narratives have largely contributed to the rise of both secular and religious extremism in the country.

We will focus on five major dominant/official political narratives which include: (i) the Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan was in conflict with Islamic ideology; (ii) secularism was the basis of Bangladesh’s war of liberation; (iii) Islamization was launched by the military regime; (iv) people who do not subscribe to the ideology and programs of or align with the Awami League are all anti-liberation forces; and (v) war crimes trial aims to obliterate the historical scandal of the nation (Table 1). The Awami League and its alliance partners comprising the socialist/communist and other left-wing political parties and cultural groups have been successfully promoting these narratives over the years. In this paper, we will show that these narratives are not substantiated by the historical facts and figures. Rather, these are socially and politically constructed and manufactured to impose a hegemonic political order in the society emasculating any political opposition and pluralism.

**Table 1.** Taxonomy of the current dominant political narratives and competing narratives.

Areas	Dominant Narratives	Competing/Counter Narratives
1. Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan	Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan was in conflict with Islam and religious sentiments	Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan had no conflict with Islamic ideology. The Pakistani ruling elite's appeal to Islam and Islamic ideology were not the same
2. Foundational ideology of Bangladesh's war of liberation	Secularism along with democracy, nationalism, and socialism	The notion of secularism was absent in the entire course of the Bengali nationalist movement. The main objective of this movement was to attain autonomy and political and economic parity or, in other words, "democracy" which eventually culminated in the war of liberation and the creation of Bangladesh. There was no reference of secularism before the birth of Bangladesh. Secularism was imposed from the above, it was not established based on the consensus of the people
3. State-sponsored Islamization in Bangladesh	Military regimes launched and promoted Islamization	The maiden government of independent Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched and started promoting Islamization which was later institutionalized by the military regimes
4. Pro-liberation and anti-liberation dichotomy	The Awami League and left-leaning parties and sociocultural organizations that subscribe to the ideology of those parties are only pro-liberation forces, the rest which are opposed to the Awami League and its aligned parties are all anti-liberation forces	False dichotomy. Those parties and groups which opposed the liberation war aligning with the then Pakistani ruling elite were mainly to preserve the integrity and unity of the country. After independence, all parties and groups who opposed the disintegration of Pakistan conceded the reality and expressed loyalty to Bangladesh. It is dangerous to equate the opposition of a party (Awami League) and its policies with sedition
5. War crimes trial	War crimes trial aims to wipe out the "scandal" of the nation	It is politically motivated, and the current Awami League government has selectively targeted the opposition, especially the Islamists. To crush the opposition alliance in which the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party in Bangladesh, is a major partner, the war crime issue has been brought to the forefront deliberately

### 3.1. Bengali Ethno-Nationalism in East Pakistan: Conflicted or Conflated with Islam?

The dominant narrative suggests that Bengali ethno-nationalism conflicted with Islamic religious nationalism, while the competing/counter narrative informs that during the Pakistani period, religious nationalism took a back seat and Bengali ethno-nationalism came to forefront in East Pakistan, however, religious nationalism was not supplanted by ethno-nationalism. The emergence of ethno-cultural nationalism in East Pakistan was a result of the exploitative policies of the West Pakistani urban military industrial bureaucratic elites (Jahan 1972). To derive legitimacy, the ruling elites continued to invoke Islam (Malik 2008), and to generate a tremendous Islamic fervor among the masses by projecting "the romantic goal of building an Islamic State" (Maniruzzaman 1980, p. 11). The ruling elites' appeal to Islam was, to note Khan (1999, pp. 175–76), "a tactical Islam" that they strategically deployed to legitimize their bad governance and to cover their failures.

Bengali nationalism had no conflict with Islamic ideology. The expression of Bengali nationalism in Pakistan was first reflected in the formation of East Pakistan Awami Muslim League in 1949. The aims and objectives of the organization were declared as—

- (i) The abolition of Zamindari system without compensation;
- (ii) The nationalization of the Jute industry;

- (iii) The withdrawal of all internal restrictions on the movement of food-grains and vigilance on the border areas;
- (iv) The holding of immediate general election in the province based on universal adult franchise;
- (v) The abolition of burdensome taxes such as the sales tax;
- (vi) The release of political prisoners;
- (vii) The recognition of Bengali as a State language (Afzal 1976, p. 100; Nair 1990, p. 60).

This seven-point declaration and subsequently East Pakistan Awami League's 42-point program as well as the United Front's 21-point electoral manifesto, both of which were drafted by Abul Mansur Ahmad, the founder senior vice-president of Awami League, were not reflective of any conflict between Islamic ideology and Bengali nationalism. The manifesto of the United Front, the electoral alliance of the Bengali nationalist parties in 1954, outlined its principle: "No legislation shall be enacted repugnant to the Qur'an and Sunnah, and steps shall be taken to enable citizens to order their lives in accordance with the principle of equality and brotherhood in Islam" (Ahad 2012, p. 182). Nezam-e-Islam, the largest Islamist party in East Pakistan in the 1950s mainly dominated by the ulama or the religious teachers, was one of the major partners of the United Front (Choudhury 1958) and had a share of 19 of 223 seats captured by the Front exhibiting the third largest party in East Pakistan<sup>1</sup> (Molla 2004, p. 218). The United Front was also joined by the Islamist "Khilafat-e-Rabbani Party". The Islamist-nationalist alliance corroborates the argument that Bengali ethno-cultural nationalism had no tension with Islam.

However, while in the 1940s and 1950s, the major Bengali nationalist parties such as East Pakistan Awami League, the National Awami Party (NAP), and Krishok Shromik Party were intensely active in mass mobilization toward the major issues of East Pakistan such as regional autonomy and language movement, and highly vocal against the exploitative policies of the West Pakistani civil-military ruling elites, Mawdudi's Jamaat-e-Islami was indifferent to these issues. Bahadur (1994) observes that the Jamaat program made no mention of the important political issues of East Pakistan such as regional autonomy and language movement. Despite the fact, the Islamist parties including the Jamaat and the Bengali nationalist parties together waged movements for the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. During the Ayub's military regime, while Jamaat was banned, leaders of five major opposition parties in Pakistan such as Awami League, Muslim League (Council), Nezam-e-Islam, National Awami Party and banned Jamaat-e-Islami formed an alliance known as the Combined Opposition Parties (COP) in July 1964 and declared nine points (Sayeed 1966) to rescue the country from the tyranny of Ayub Khan. COP unanimously agreed on the proposal of Maulana Bhasani regarding the nomination of Fatema Jinnah, the sister of M. A. Jinnah, as the presidential candidate against Ayub Khan in the presidential elections in 1965 under the Basic Democracy system earlier introduced by Ayub Khan (Al-Mujahid 1965). Fatema Jinnah's candidacy generated the controversy over whether a woman can be the head of a Muslim state. Leading ulama including Maulana Mawdudi and Mufti Muhammad Shafi supported her candidacy, while another group of ulama declared her candidacy as un-Islamic (Haq 1996, p. 165). In April 1967, in Dhaka, leaders of five parties such as Pakistan Awami League, Pakistan Muslim League (Council), Pakistan Nezam-e-Islam Party, Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, and National Democratic Front (NDF) again formed a coalition named the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and declared eight points to fight the Ayub regime and restore freedom and democracy (Rashiduzzaman 1970). In January 1969, in Dhaka, at the height of anti-Ayub movement, leaders of eight major opposition parties such as East Pakistan Awami League (six-pointers), Pakistan Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, Pakistan Jamiat-e-ulama-e-Islam, National Democratic Front, Pakistan Nezam-e-Islami Party, Pakistan Muslim League, and Pakistan National Awami Party formed Democratic Action Committee (DAC) and declared eight points which demanded the restoration of

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<sup>1</sup> Out of 223 United Front-won Muslim seats, East Pakistan Awami Muslim League shared 143, Krishok Shromik Party 48, Nezam-e-Islami 19, and Ganatantri Dal shared 13 seats (Molla 2004, p. 218).

parliamentary democracy and a direct franchise (Ahmed 1979). Historical evidence therefore clearly shows that Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan had no conflict with Islamic ideology.

### 3.2. Secularism: Was it a Basis of Bangladesh's War of Liberation?

The constitution of 1972 underlined secularism as one of the cardinal state principles of Bangladesh. Commonly called *dharma nirapekkhata* (religious neutrality) in Bengali, secularism of Mujib's version was akin to Anglo-American secularism that reinforced the neutrality of religions and elimination of communal politics as opposed to French version of secularism or what scholars called "assertive secularism" (Kuru 2007) emphasizing the religious elimination or atheism. Mujib explains his notion of secularism:

Secularism does not mean absence of religion. You are a Muslim; you perform your religious rites. The Hindus, Christians, Buddhists all will freely perform their religious rites. There is no irreligiousness on the soil of Bangladesh but there is secularism. This sentence has a meaning and the meaning is that none would be allowed to exploit the people in the name of religion . . . No communal politics will be allowed in the country. (Cited in O'Connell 1976, p. 69)

Mujib's secularism was characterized by the recognition rather than rejection of all religions what Maniruzzaman (1990, p. 70) called the adoption of "multi-theocracy." Dr. Kamal Hossain, the principal author of the constitution of Bangladesh, in an interview with the authors, argues that the acrimonious experience of the abuse of religion in politics in United Pakistan "forced us to adopt secularism in the constitution which was intended for not the rejection of religion itself but that of communalism and the abuse of religion in the political realm." Maenuddin Khan Badal MP, Executive President of a faction of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), interviewed by the authors, also argues that "secularism in Bangladesh means nothing but the absence of communalism and religious neutrality." "This secularism is not similar to Western model of secularism that denies any transcendental authority," Badal adds. However, there was growing criticisms against the doctrine of secularism; the critics were successful in propagating the notion of secularism as the absence of religion. Such propagation was so deep that Mujib had to repeatedly clarify that he was not against religion and his notion of secularism was not anti-religious (Hakim 1998):

The slanderous rumor is being circulated against us that we are not believers in Islam. In response to this, our position is very clear. We are not believers in the labels of Islam. We believe in the Islam of justice. Our Islam is the Islam of the holy and merciful Prophet. (Cited in Hakim 1998, p. 104)

Some scholars who had participated in this study argue that secularization efforts under Mujib regime such as the elimination of the Qur'anic inscription *iqra bismi rabbi-kallazi khalaq* (Read! In the name of your Lord Who created everything; Qur'an 96:1) from the Dhaka University monogram in 1972 (Miah 2009), the deletion of the word "Muslim" from the name of a Dhaka University students' hall (Salimullah Muslim Hall) in 1972 (SM Hall Alumni Association DU 2012), the abolishment of the Islamic Academy in 1972 (Islamic Foundation n.d.), the cancellation of recitation from religious texts in the inaugural session of state-owned radio and television, the reduction of financial allotment in *madrassa* education, the removal of Islamic stories in the primary and secondary school textbooks, and most importantly the banning of Islamic politics made the people suspicious of Mujib's commitment to religion/Islam. Even people began to feel that in the name of secularism, the regime was particularly hostile to Islam rather than to all religions in the state (Islam 2001). What appears clear is that Bangladesh, after the attainment of independence, became a secular state though its people had hardly any orientation or attachment to secularism. The gap between a secular state and a secular people was evident. Maniruzzaman (1990, p. 69) argues that "secularism in Bangladesh did not reflect Bangladesh's societal spirit and history. It arose as a utilitarian expediency in the political field."

Religion and particularly Islam has been deeply ingrained in the social, political, and cultural fabric of Bangladesh. Dropping the word “Muslim” from the party’s name in 1955, Awami League attempted to appear as a non-communal party; however, as [Hakim \(1998, p. 102\)](#) notes:

During the ‘Pakistani days’, secularism never became prominent in the ideological discourse of the Awami League. All popular political campaigns spearheaded by the party avoided the demand for a secular state. It indicated that the party was reluctant to risk the support of a vast majority of the population who demonstrated a craving for Islamic statehood in the movement for independence from Pakistan.

Awami League’s 42-point party manifesto, United Front’s 21-point election manifesto, Sheikh Mujib’s historical 6-point program, students’ 11-point demand, Awami League’s 1970 election manifesto, and the Proclamation of Independence Order issued by the Awami League government in exile on 10 April 1971 have had no reflection of secularism. Rather the opposite is witnessed. The United Front election manifesto in 1954 explicitly emphasized the ideology of Islam ([Ahad 2012](#)). The election manifesto of Awami League in 1970 unambiguously stated:

The favored religion of the vast majority of the population is Islam. On this matter the Awami League has decided that there will be in the Constitution very clear guarantees that no law will be formulated or enforced in Pakistan contrary to the laws of Islam well established in the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah. There will be guarantees firmly established in the Constitution for preserving the purity of the numerous religious institutions. Adequate arrangements will be made for extending religious instructions at all levels. (Cited in [Alam 1993a, p. 96](#); [Hakim 1998, p. 102](#))

The most significant document of the war of liberation of Bangladesh is the Proclamation of Independence Order in which “secularism was not even mentioned, let alone emphasized” ([Hakim 1998, p. 102](#)). Dr. Asif Nazrul, a law professor at Dhaka University and a celebrated public intellectual, in an interview with the authors, argues that “the spirit of liberation war is reflected in the classical documents of Bangladesh such as the six-point program in 1966, the election manifesto of Awami League in 1970, Sheikh Mujib’s 7 March Address in 1971, the Proclamation of Independence Order, and the provisional constitution.” “There were precisely two main spirits of the liberation war—the establishment of a true or real democracy and the establishment of a welfare state in which there will be no poor-rich discrimination, in which the working people will not be exploited or in other words, the establishment of an exploitation-free society or economic system,” adds Nazrul. “Among other issues, there was a spirit of non-communalism instead of secularism,” he also asserts. This eminent educationist further stresses: “in no documents that I have referred to you, the word ‘secularism’ is found. From where it has derived, only God knows.”

Similarly, Habibun Nabi Khan Sohel, a central leader of BNP, who was also interviewed for this study, asserts that “the fundamental spirit of the war of liberation of Bangladesh was to establish an exploitation-free democratic society in which people’s hopes and aspirations were to be reflected.” The leftist group linked with Awami League had a vision of a secular state though still it was implicit; the masses had no acquaintance with, let alone interest in, secularism prior to the independence of Bangladesh. [Griffiths and Hasan \(2015, p. 233\)](#) note that “the vast majority of Bangladeshi Muslims consider themselves as pious and God-fearing. Secularism as a value was not based on a consensus of the population but was imposed from above by the ruling party, the Awami League whose constituency was urban and middle class.” [Hakim \(1998, p. 103\)](#) similarly observes:

Bangladesh adopted secularism in principle without ever considering seriously whether its civil society was mature enough in its outlook to sustain this predominantly Western modernist value. The atrocities committed by the Pakistani soldiers during the nine months of liberation war did not weaken the Islamic sentiment of the people of Bangladesh. They, as ever before, remained firmly devoted to the practices of their Islamic faith.



The dominant narrative that secularism was a basis of the liberation war of Bangladesh is largely unfounded according to the historical facts. The main objective of the liberation movement was to attain autonomy and political and economic parity or in a word “democracy.” There was no reference of secularism before the birth of Bangladesh. Secularism was imposed from the above; it did not emerge as a natural progression of the societal demand.

### 3.3. State-Sponsored Islamization in Bangladesh: Who and When Started?

According to the dominant political narrative promoted by the current ruling regime, General Zia’s military regime in the mid-1970s launched state-sponsored Islamization in Bangladesh. However, the competing narrative suggests that the Mujib regime in 1973, despite the secular character of the constitution, launched the Islamization process which was institutionalized by the subsequent military and civilian rulers. According to this narrative, partly due to fear of being alienated from the masses and partly due to pragmatic reasons, Sheikh Mujib gradually turned to demonstrate himself as the defender of Islam and tried to make himself popular among the Islamists and religious masses. In 1973, Mujib declared a general amnesty for all the prisoners (including Islamist leaders who collaborated with the Pakistani military during the war of liberation) held under the Collaborators Act (however, exceptions were made only in cases where there were specific criminal charges) (Jahan 1974) to expand the Awami League’s support base (Alam 1993b). The recitation from religious texts in state-run radio and television was resumed (Huq 2014). The government grants for *madrassas* were increased: According to statistics, the government increased allocation for *madrasa* education to taka 7.2 million in 1973 from taka 2.5 million in 1971 (Riaz 2008, p. 118). The study of Islamic subjects was made compulsory in secondary schools (Islam 2001). Public sale and consumption of alcohol and gambling were banned (Chakravarty 2015). The government officially observed Eid-e-Miladun-Nabi (Prophet Muhammad’s birthday) throughout the country (Islam 2001). In 1974, Daud Haider published a poem in the pro-socialist *Dainik Sangbad*, which allegedly derides the Prophet Muhammad. Owing to huge public uproar, Mujib sent him into exile (Hasan 2010), and he never returned to Bangladesh. The Islamic Academy that Mujib had earlier abolished was revived in 1975, and it was upgraded to a foundation and renamed as Islamic Foundation (Ghosh 1993; Alam 1993a; Husain 1997). Addressing the inaugural ceremony of the Foundation, Yusuf Ali, a member of the Mujib Cabinet, affirmed that “Bangladesh is committed to the ideals and teachings of Islam and she would continue her efforts for the establishment of peace and universal brotherhood—the most important tenets of Islam” (Cited in Hakim 1998, p. 106). Islamic Foundation Bangladesh is the largest umbrella organization under the Ministry of Religious Affairs working to “disseminate values and ideals of Islam and carry out activities related to those values and ideals” (Islamic Foundation n.d.). One of the major contributions of the Islamic Foundation to the process of Islamization was the translation of the Qur’an from Arabic into Bengali, making the Qur’an cheaply and readily available to the readers (Griffiths and Hasan 2015; Riaz and Naser 2011). Currently the Islamic Foundation has offices in all 64 districts. It has also six divisional offices as well as seven Imam Training Academy Centers and twenty-nine Islamic Mission Centers (Islamic Foundation n.d.). This autonomous institution has five major objectives: to propagate Islamic values, to promote research underlining the contribution of Islamic culture, to propagate Islamic concepts of tolerance and justice, to provide grants on Islamic projects, and to promote collaboration with and between organizations and groups whose philosophy aligns with the Foundation (Griffiths and Hasan 2015; Hossain 2006).

Realizing the economic importance of Middle Eastern countries, Mujib began to promote Islamic cooperation with Middle Eastern Muslim leaders. In 1973, Bangladesh under Mujib regime extended its support to the Arab nations in their war with Israel and even sent a medical team to help the Arabs (Maniruzzaman 1975; Hakim 1998). In February 1974, Mujib joined the OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) meeting held in Lahore, Pakistan (Maniruzzaman 1975; Hakim 1998). Soon after being a member of the OIC, Bangladesh joined the Islamic Foreign Minister’s Conference held at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and became one of the founding-members of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB)

established at the Islamic Finance Ministers' Conference held at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in August 1974 (Maniruzzaman 1975).

Sheikh Mujib also used to make frequent references to Islam in his speeches and public articulation by using common Islamic terms and idioms such as *Allah* (God), *insha-Allah* (God willing), *bismillah* (in the name of God), *imam* (religious leader), and so on (Maniruzzaman 1990). He categorically declared that he was proud to be Muslim and proud that his country was the second largest Muslim nation in the world (Riaz 2004). In his later day speeches, Mujib even dropped his symbolic valedictory expression *joy bangla* (glory to Bengal) (Maniruzzaman 1990; Husain 1997) and ended his speeches with *khuda hafez* (God protect you), the traditional Indo-Islamic phrase for bidding farewell. Mujib also highlighted his efforts to establish an intimate relationship with the Muslim countries in the Arab world (Maniruzzaman 1990). On 4 November 1972, during the parliamentary session after the passage of the Constitution Bill, Mujib led the *munajaat* (Islamic prayer) (Riaz 2004). Mujib thus made a major shift from his earlier "secular project" toward the Islamization process in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> Griffiths and Hasan (2015, p. 233) note that "the process of promoting religion (Islam) as a basis for national identity had already begun with the Awami League before the military coup of 1975. It was to accelerate during military rule over the next 15 years." The evils of the Mujib regime, such as corruption, inefficiency, and dictatorial disposition eventually led to the emergence of a fertile ground for military intervention and further Islamization of the polity (Ghosh 1993; Hashmi 2004).

General Zia made Islam the focal point of the regime's ideology (Riaz 2008). His regime's institutionalization of Islamization included: (i) dismantling the secular principle of the state and in its place incorporated "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah" (Ahamed 1983); (ii) introducing "Bangladeshi nationalism" instead of "Bengali nationalism" that provided an "idea of nationalism in post-colonial Bangladesh with an Islamic character by distinguishing the Bengali Muslims from the Bengali Hindus of neighboring West Bengal" (Alam 1993b, p. 100); (iii) incorporating the Qur'anic phrase *bismillah-ar-rahman-ar-rahim* (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) before the preamble of the constitution (Ahamed 1983); (iv) deleting Article 12 of the constitution that pledged to eliminate communalism, official promotion of religion, discrimination on religious ground, and the abuse of religion (Ahamed 1983); (v) omitting Article 38 of the constitution that had imposed a ban on the formation and operation of religion-based political parties. This allowed Islam-based parties and groups to return to political arena in Bangladesh (Hakim 1998); (vi) making a constitutional recognition of pro-Islamic foreign policy (Rashiduzzaman 1978); and (vii) providing generous support to the spread of Islamic education and cultural practices (Riaz 2008).

General Ershad also posited Islam as the basis of state ideology. In a speech in the beginning of his regime, he declared:

Islam is our ideal and it is the only way to our emancipation. The existence of the country will be at stake if we fail to establish Islam in Bangladesh. We, the nine crore [ninety million] Muslims (of Bangladesh) will certainly speak about Islam, think about Islam and dream about Islam. This is our only way for emancipation. (Cited in Rahman 1985, p. 2)

The institutionalization of Islamization by Ershad regime included: (i) declaration of Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh through the eighth amendment of the constitution (Ahamed and Nazneen 1990); (ii) establishment of a Zakat fund to be headed by the President (Ahamed 1983); (iii) formulation of a new education policy that intended to introduce Arabic and Islamic Studies in the both elementary and secondary schools (Riaz 2004); (iv) mandatorily broadcasting of *azan* (call for prayer) five times a day and airing of Islamic programs in increasing numbers in state-run electronic media (Hakim 1998; Ahmed 2004); (v) attempting to turn the *Shaheed dibas* (Martyrs'

<sup>2</sup> Husain (1997, p. 86) considers Mujib's turning toward Islam as "religious ebullience" and argues that it could be seen as rhetoric, not reality. However, it is grossly unfair to paint all these pro-Islamic efforts which included both institutional and political-cultural as merely unreal and rhetoric.

Day/21 February) into a religious occasion through prayers and recitations from the Qur'an, instead of the barefoot procession at dawn and the traditional colorful paintings known as *alpana* (Hakim 1998); (vi) establishment of a separate directorate under the Ministry of Education for *madrassa* education and making remarkable contribution to the mushrooming growth of religious institutions including *madrassas* (Ahamed and Nazneen 1990); (vii) sanction of liberal grants to shrines and mosques, especially in order for their repairs, reconstruction, and beautification (Ahamed and Nazneen 1990); and (viii) making Friday, instead of Sunday, the weekly holiday (Ahmad 2008), and changing the name of Red Cross to Red Crescent (Mohsin 2004).

Khaleda Zia followed Zia's policy of Islamization and stressed Islamic symbolism (Riaz 2004; Shehabuddin 2008). Sheikh Hasina also demonstrated her inclination to Islamic identity and symbolism. She began using Islamic idioms such as *bismillah*, *khuda hafez*, and *insha-Allah* in her public speeches (Riaz 2004). Party political posters displayed these idioms including Hasina's portrait with *hijab* and prayer beads in hands (Riaz 2004; Shehabuddin 2008; Bennett 2010). Mainstream secular and non-secular parties regardless of their ideologies and programs equally use Islamic idioms and phrases.

#### 3.4. Pro-Liberation and Anti-Liberation Forces Dichotomy and War Crimes Discourse

The dominant political narrative continues to assert the arbitrary dichotomy of pro-liberation and anti-liberation forces in Bangladesh. The Awami League and the left-leaning parties have been fostering and advancing this dichotomy since the inception of Bangladesh. However, in recent years, with the rise of the Islamists, in particular, in the political realm, this dichotomy has been reinforced more emphatically than ever before. The Awami League and its alliance leaders and intellectuals frequently claim that they are the only pro-liberation forces and the rest and particularly its opposition camp—the BNP-Jamaat alliance—is anti-liberation forces. Even, their narrative continues to deny Ziaur Rahman, BNP's founder and former president, as a freedom fighter. Awami League's Joint General Secretary Mahbul Alam Hanif affirmed that "Ziaur Rahman was not a freedom fighter rather a Pak (Pakistani) agent" (Sarwaruddin 2016). Similarly, Awami League leader Hasan Mahmud claimed that "Zia worked as a Pakistan spy during 1971 war" (Staff Correspondent 2014). Their narrative suggests that the BNP-Jamaat people have never accepted Bangladesh as an independent state and are supposedly engaged in "re-uniting Bangladesh with Pakistan" which sounds a conspiracy theory indeed. The competing narrative suggests that this dichotomy is discursively constructed to eliminate the political opposition and ideological contestation. Although the Jamaat opposed the liberation war in 1971, it, according to a couple of Jamaat aligned intellectuals interviewed by the authors, accepted the reality and has consolidated its political base over the years through democratic engagement and political contestation. These intellectuals also argue that "since 1986, Jamaat has been having representation in the parliament and even the proponents of this dichotomy have occasionally enjoyed a "marriage of convenience" with Jamaat in getting to power." The BNP, on the other hand, has ruled the country for almost two decades. The founder of BNP, General Ziaur Rahman, was a sector commander in the war of liberation, and later he was even awarded the second-highest state-honor—the title *Biruttam* (best hero)—by none other than Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for his heroic role in the war of liberation. Interviewed with the authors, Habibun Nabi Khan Sohel, a central leader of BNP, asserts that "it is ridiculous to term the BNP as an anti-liberation force." "Those who term BNP anti-liberationist," Sohel continues, "are ignorant of history" and their attempt is "to malign BNP as they failed to face it politically." The dominant narrative's arbitrary suggestion that whoever opposes the Awami League automatically falls in the anti-liberation camp has been largely contributing to increasing polarization and division within the nation. The competing narrative suggests that there is currently no anti-liberation force in Bangladesh working to integrate the nation with Pakistan.

The dominant narrative suggests that war crimes trial, that already hanged most top leaders of Jamaat and one senior leader of BNP to death, aims to free the nation from its scandalous past, and the "crimes against humanity" cannot go unpunished. However, the competing narrative suggests that

any crime should be tried in a fair and transparent manner and in good faith. The study found that the current war crimes trial was initiated in bad faith, aiming to eliminate the oppositional forces from the political sphere. The BNP, claims Sohel, “does not oppose the war crimes trial;” however, he continues, “any trial should be in a sound and transparent manner and with good intention.” The Jamaat intellectuals similarly argue that the ruling elite has not initiated the process of war crimes trial in good faith, rather it aims to crush the oppositional forces and particularly the Islamist forces in Bangladesh. Because, the Islamist forces, they further argue, have been perceived by the ruling regime as “political threats” to the way of its political power over the years. Jamaat, the largest Islamist party in the country, has gained nearly five to twelve percent popular votes in the parliamentary elections over the years (see Table 2). However, this small percentage of vote bank has placed the party to earn the title as “king-maker” in Bangladesh politics.

**Table 2.** The parliamentary elections performance of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI).

BJI	1973 1st	1979 2nd	1986 3rd	1988 4th	1991 5th	1996 6th	1996 7th	2001 8th	2008 9th	2014 10th
Seats Captured	Not allowed to contest	BML-IDL alliance 20 <sup>3</sup>	10	Boycotted	18	Boycotted	3	17	2	Boycotted
Vote (%)	-	10.08	4.61	-	12.13	-	8.61	4.28	4.70	-
Secured Seats	-	266	-	-	222	-	300	31	39	-
Contested Total Seats	-	300	300	-	300	-	300	300	300	-

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission data; data from Islam (2015, pp. 213–22).

#### 4. The Rise of Assertive Secularism in Contemporary Bangladesh

Sheikh Hasina’s second term (2009–2014) opened a new chapter of her governance that served to bring back the old secular ideology to the state. Through the fifteenth amendment of the constitution, the regime omitted the constitutional principle “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah”, and in its place restored secularism; Article 12 of the 1972 constitution was reestablished (Salehin 2013; Pattanaik 2013). Simultaneously, it retained *bismillah-ar-rahman-ar-rahim* (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) and the provision of the state religion (Salehin 2013; Jahan and Shahan 2014), which experts such as Dr. Akbar Ali Khan and Nurul Kabir, interviewed by the authors, described as “the political and ideological contradictions of the ruling Awami League.” Nevertheless, it has endeavored to give non-Islamic people a sense of belonging by rephrasing the Islamic provisions of the constitution: second translation of *bismillah-ar-rahman-ar-rahim* was added that reads: “In the name of the Creator, the Merciful” (The Constitution 2011, p. 1). In place of the Article 2A that reads: “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but 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 right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions” (The Constitution 2011, p. 2). The regime also omitted Article 25(2) that underlined the consolidation, preservation and strengthening of fraternal relations among the Muslim countries (The Constitution 2011, p. 7).

In the post-9/11 geopolitical context, Islam (2011a, p. 5) argues, Hasina’s regime (2009–2014) adopted comprehensive strategies to “de-Islamize” the nation, primarily to obtain the uncontested support of certain Western countries perceived as hostile to Islamism. Principally in two ways the regime sought to execute those strategies: first, by demonizing the mainstream Islamic parties, groups, and institutions, and second, by threatening and limiting Islamic visibility in the public sphere. The Islamists, Islamic symbols and institutions are argued to have become the prime target of the

<sup>3</sup> BML (Bangladesh Muslim League) and IDL (Islamic Democratic League) contested in the 1979 elections in alliance. The BJI was a part of the IDL and as nominees of the IDL, 6 BJI candidates were elected (Islam 2015, p. 213).

secularization project of the ruling elite (Haider 2008). The project is said to be traced back to the *Harvard International Review's* essay "Stemming the Rise of Islamic Extremism in Bangladesh" authored by Sheikh Hasina's son Sajeeb Wazed Joy and former American military officer Carl J. Ciovacco published in November 2008 just before the ninth general elections of Bangladesh. The authors vociferously argue that the influence of Islamic politics what they call "Islamism" coupled with the Islamic elements within the army and Islamic education system (*madrassa* education) are the major impediments to the secularization of Bangladesh (Islam 2011b).<sup>4</sup> In order to make a secular Bangladesh, they proposed a secularization project what they termed "a secular plan" entailing the secularization of the *madrassas*, the military, and the entire administration, and to implement the proposed plan, they argue that secular Awami League must occupy the state power. The authors, without presenting any empirical or factual evidence, claim that the Islamists including the Jamaat-e-Islami "tend to support reunification with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan" (Ciovacco and Wazed 2008). In the same token, they also claim that the militant outfits such as Jamaatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB), Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and Harkatul Jihad (HuJi) are the militant arm of the Jamaat-e-Islami (Ciovacco and Wazed 2008). These outlawed organizations "overtly denounce the Constitution and seek to replace democracy and secularism with a governing construct based on Sharia Law," the authors add (Ciovacco and Wazed 2008). Islam (2011b, p. 7) sees the essay as the blueprint for the regime that intends to transform the religiously motivated nation into a secularized one:

Following this blueprint for its secular plan, the Awami League is now seeking to gain the support of both Muslim and non-Muslim nations by creating a discourse that attempts to portray Bangladesh as a country at risk of being overtaken by "Islamic terrorist forces." The regime's utilization of international trends and narratives—and willingness to play the terrorism card—is indispensable to its long-held and systematic objective of eliminating Islam from the country's political and social landscape.

Deviating from her father's later approach, Sheikh Hasina in her second term of premiership began to shrink the religious (Islam's) space in the Majoritarian Muslim state—a situation Islam (2011a, p. 125) phrased as "'minority Islam' in Muslim majority Bangladesh." Apart from the replacement of secularism in the Islamic provisions of the constitution, the regime consciously adopted political measures to pave the way for a secular Bangladesh. These include, according to Islam (2011a, pp. 128–37), the *jongification* (arbitrarily linking to militancy) of the Islamic political parties; creating a discourse of war criminals; embarking on massive crackdown on Islamic parties; controlling Islamic institutions; secularizing education; banning religious gatherings; and changing the Muslim family law.<sup>5</sup> The ruling coterie began to vehemently attack Islamic institutions and symbols, and tried to associate them with terrorism. For example, addressing at a workshop at Dhaka on 1 April 2009, the then Law Minister Barrister Shafique Ahmed, showing no evidence, asserts: "Qawmi madrasas are turning into breeding grounds of religion-based terrorism" (Staff Correspondent 2009). Participating at a roundtable discussion at Dhaka on 16 July 2010, the then Deputy Speaker of the parliament Colonel (Rtd) Shawkat Ali spoke out against the *burka* (Muslim veil) stating "only those who have ugly faces use religion to cover them" (Daily Naya Diganta 2010; Daily Amar Desh 2010). Sajeeb Wazed Joy earlier observed that the sale of *burkas* had risen to nearly 500 percent over a period of five years (presumably he referred to the BNP regime, 2001–2006) and saw it as an indication of the growing tide of Islamism, and thus offered policy suggestions to stop it (Ciovacco and Wazed 2008). Consequently, a number of educational institutions including BRAC University (Tasnim 2013), Chittagong Nursing College (Staff Correspondent 2012), and Sociology Department of Rajshahi University (Islam 2011a) moved to ban *hijab* (headscarf) and *niqab* (face veil). Chittagong Nursing College even went one step further than others, speaking to a television channel, the students wearing *hijab* alleged that the

<sup>4</sup> Also see Ciovacco and Wazed (2008).

<sup>5</sup> For detailed discussions, see Islam (2011a, 2011b).

principal of the college even prevented them from performing their prayer: “Hosne Ara (principal of the college) madam has said, if we (students) do nurse well, serve people, we will not require *namaz* (prayer).” (She further says) “Who sees your *namaz*? However, everyone will see your nursing” (Uttal Dhansiri 2012). Experts, interviewed by the authors, note that religious symbols are not merely symbols; they have a great deal to do with identity, Muslim identity in this case. The attack on this identity, the experts opine, is highly likely to be counter-productive.

## 5. Conclusions

Since the advent of Islam in Bangladesh largely through the peaceful missionary activities by the Sufis and saints, the Bangladeshi Muslims have exhibited strong attachments to Islam. In the early days of British colonization, political Islam combined with puritanical reformative movements within the Islamic sphere in British India. However, in the later days, Islamic religious nationalism emerged in conjunction with anti-colonial movements that ultimately led to the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims—Pakistan. Bangladesh emerged from Pakistan through a gradual process of the Bengali nationalist movement which eventually culminated in a bloody war of liberation. The dominant political narratives which are constructed by the parties and groups which led the war of liberation have been contested through examining politico-historical artifacts of the country. The Bengali nationalist movement was a result of dictatorial disposition and exploitative policies of the Pakistani ruling elites toward East Pakistan. The ruling elites’ appeal to Islam was a “tactical Islam” which they employed for their political mileage (Khan 1999). Islam had no tension with Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan.

Secularism in Bangladesh, currently perceived as the rejection of Islam and its symbols from the political and social landscapes, was imposed from the above, not established according the consensus of the people. A serious gap between a secular state and a secular people was evident. Throughout history, people in Bangladesh have never rejected religion in their sociopolitical life. This is why secularism collapsed within a short time of its introduction and instead religious influence strongly emerged in the sociopolitical realm of Bangladesh. Despite the secular character of the constitution, the maiden government of Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched the Islamization process which was later institutionalized by the military and civilian regimes. No doubt, Zia and Ershad played a major role in Islamization.

The rise of assertive secularism in the beginning of the 2010s by the Hasina’s regime has made a serious confrontation between pro-Islamist and pro-secularist people. Once again secularism has been established arbitrarily and without any consensus of the people. The regime adopted a strategy, as emerged overwhelmingly from our respondents, to wipe out the oppositional forces and, to this end, discursively constructed the narratives of anti-liberation and pro-liberation dichotomy as well as war crimes discourse. The process of democracy has been trampled to execute the arbitrary policies of the regime. The existing dictatorship in the name of democracy is conceived as a major crisis for sociopolitical stability and sustainable development in contemporary Bangladesh. To elude this crisis, we offer some policy recommendations: Firstly, the restoration of democracy through a free, fair, and credible election is a must, as no political system other than democracy will work in Bangladesh. Secondly, imposed secularism will not work in an overwhelmingly Islamic society like Bangladesh. A secular state without a secular people is prone to be counterproductive and similarly fundamentalist in itself. Both militant secularism and militant Islamism should therefore be contained. Thirdly, the arbitrary dichotomy of pro-liberation and anti-liberation forces driven largely by a politics of hate and vengeance has been dividing the nation over the years. To achieve a national unity and consensus, this narrative should be subverted. War crimes trial should be accomplished in a fair and transparent manner without indulging in any political considerations. The damage already created by this trial needs to be recuperated through inclusive policies of political pluralism, social cohesion, fairness, and social justice.

The dominant political narratives backed by secular parties and groups hide the nexus between Bengali nationalism and Islamic ideology. People in East Pakistan, being driven by religious (Islamic) nationalism, once voted for Pakistan. When Pakistan was established, the same people, being driven by Bengali nationalism, waged movements against the Pakistani ruling elites. People opposed the Pakistani rulers, not Islam. Throughout the period of united Pakistan, nobody spoke any words against Islam. Secularism was never uttered in the entire course of the movement. In the name of secularism, the establishment of assertive secularism which seeks to control even the private religious domain of people emasculating the religious forces and constraining public visibility of religiousness is inconsistent with Bangladesh's history, politics, society, and culture. The current ruling regime, which promotes the dominant secular narratives, continues to suppress its oppositional forces and coerce others to conform to its ideology to sustain the hegemonic social and political order in Bangladesh.

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