

Secularism, Islamism and Religious Minorities : the Case of Bangladesh

A.K.M Iftekharul Islam
Assistant Professor
Islamic History & Culture
University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
Mail: iftekharul.ihc@du.ac.bd

Abstract

Religion has become an important component of socio-political life in Bangladesh though the state of Bangladesh started its journey on a secular basis of nationhood. Secularism in here has always been perceived as the rejection of Islam. Hence, a serious gap between a secular state and a secular people is evident. The initiatives for the introduction of assertive secularism lately specially, in the beginning of the 2010s by the present government has also failed and created serious confrontation between pro-Islamist and pro-secularist people. This paper will at first argue that throughout history, the people of Bangladesh have never rejected religion in the realm of their society and culture. This is the reason why secularism collapsed after its introduction. Instead religious influence strongly emerged in to socio-political perspective of Bangladesh. Even if, with the changes of regimes, nationalism also took an evident turn toward religion. This facilitates the increase of percentage of Muslims from 76.9% in 1951 to 90.4% in 2011. However, the country has a long tradition of religious co-existence. People enjoys religious freedom as per constitution and in practice. Against the tide, recently as a democratic Muslim majority country Bangladesh has experienced a series of violent attacks by extremists. Furthermore, communal violence continues to take place driven by political rivalries. At the end, a humble attempt will be made to examine the present condition of religious minorities in Bangladesh, impact of religious tension of India and Myanmar on it and policy options for the government and the civil society to ensure religious co-existence of all sorts of people.

Key words: Religion, Secularism, Assertive Secularism, Nationalism, Extremism, Democratic Muslim majority country, Communal violence, Religious minorities

Introduction:

Bangladesh was founded on four principles of secularism, socialism, democracy and nationalism. However, with the passage of time the confrontation got emerged between the secularism and religion. This confrontation has marred the country and political parties here are using secularism and religion to fulfill their vested interests. The democracy has been the first victim of this confrontation and partially so to say, it could not flourish as was expected after the independence. There is the fundamental tension between the nominal secularism of the state, formally re-enshrined in 2010 and the continued elevation of Islam as the state religion above other faiths. On the other hand, minority issue is no exception in Bangladesh like other part of the world and the minorities have been under threats of the majoritarian voices. With exceptions, their voices are unheard. The recent spate of attacks against Ahmadis, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Shi'a Muslims as well as atheists and secularists highlight the insecurity facing these communities. However, some recent gestures of support from the government, such as the assurances of protection issued by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in December 2015 to Christian leaders after a series of attacks against the community, are welcome signs of a degree of political will to achieve real change for minorities. This paper attempts to cover all these issues in respect of Bangladesh and necessary recommendations will be made at the end.

Religion , Islamism and Secularism:

Before stepping into main discussion it is necessary to clarify some terms. Islam is an Arabic word which means submission 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 Allah. The Oxford Dictionary of English defines Islam as the "the religion of Muslims, a monotheistic faith regarded as revealed through Muhammad as the Prophet of Allah".¹ It is hereby mentionable that long before the Muslim conquest of Bengal in the beginning of the 13th century by Ikhtiyar Uddin Mohammad bin Bakhtyar Khalji, Islam came to Bengal through the benevolent efforts of the Sufis, saints and Muslim traders.² The Muslim rulers invariably patronized the Muslim missionaries, scholars and Sufis in different manner. Besides, social liberation policy of Islam and immigration played most part in the spread and consolidation of Islam in Bengal and particularly East Bengal which is now Bangladesh.

On the other hand, the amalgamation of Islam with politics is called Islamism. Islam and politics are inextricably interrelated and intertwined. Islamism has been a characteristic feature of Muslim society since the dawn of Islam's culture and civilization. By the 17th century while Islam took a solid ground in Bengal, political Islam also gained momentum in the society. The *Farai'di* movement of Haji Shariat Ullah (1781-1840), the *Tariqah-i- Muhammadiya* movement of Mir Nisar Ali alias Titu Mir (1782-1831) and the *Khilafat* movement marked the rise of political Islam here.

In 1851, an English social reformer George Jacob Holyoake coined the term 'Secularism'. He believed that any government worth its salt should work for the benefit of the working class and the poor based on their needs here and now. He was not interested in the needs the working class may have in a future life of for their souls. But he did not place secularism in opposition to religion. Secularism, therefore, focuses on this world rather than the immaterial, the spiritual or any other world. According to Neera Chandhoke,

'Secularism is not atheism. The concept is not defined in opposition to, or as a negation of, religion. It is an alternative way of understanding and dealing with matters of the world'.³

Secular and Religious Frontiers in Bangladesh:

Interestingly, the state of Bangladesh started its journey on a secular basis of nationhood, religion soon became an important component. The nationalist movement of the East Bengalis was predicated on Bengali nationalism, which had a distinct secular orientation based on Bengali language and culture. Seeds of this nationalism were sown in 1948 when Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared in Dhaka that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. The newly created Pakistan also then used religion as a tool for constructing Pakistani nationhood. Bengali language and culture were alleged to be influenced by Hinduism. Thus 'in 1949 the central Minister for education openly proposed the introduction of Arabic script for Bengali'.⁴

East Bengalis perceived this use of religion as a tool of domination. To counterpoise this Islamic nationalism, a secular nationalism emerged in East Bengal that was militant in its emphasis on the Bengali language and culture. By the mid 1960s the Bengalis had moved on to the demands for economic and political autonomy as discrimination and domination of the West Pakistani ruling elite over them were evident in all spheres of life.⁵ In 1971 the Pakistani regime again employed the rhetoric of religion in carrying out one of the worst genocides of history. The Bengalis fought valiantly against Pakistani suppression and the new country Bangladesh came in to being on 6th December 1971.

It is true that Bengali nationalism, as it emerged in East Bengal was secular in its content but that was the logical outcome of a situation where Bengalis were being oppressed in the name of religion. The new state indeed based itself on a secular plank. The constitution of Bangladesh, adopted by the Bangladesh Parliament on 4 November 1972, in its preamble paragraph 2 accepted 'nationalism', 'socialism', 'democracy' and 'secularism' as state principles. In the context of Bangladesh, the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman defined it in the following words:

Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. Muslims will observe their religion: Hindus will observe their own; Christians and Buddhists will observe their religions. No one will be allowed to interference in other's religions. The people of Bengal do not want any interference in religious matters. Religion cannot be used for political ends.....⁶

To implement the above, Article 12 of the constitution stated that the principle of Secularism shall be realized by the elimination of:

- Communalism in all forms;
- The granting by the state of political status in favor of any religion;
- The abuse of religion for political purposes; and
- Any discrimination against, or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion.⁷

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman followed this religious neutrality specially in mass media. He adopted the policy of equal opportunity for all religions and ordered citations from the Holy books of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity at the start of the broadcasts by the State Radio and Television. But once the hegemony of West Pakistanis was removed, the Muslim identity of Bengalis again came to the fore. India's role during the liberation war of Bangladesh and the Awami League's over association with India had revived fears among the general people of Hindu domination. Furthermore, according to Talukdar Maniruzzaman, "secularism in Bangladesh did not reflect its societal spirit".⁸ The policy of secularism first backfired in the education sector. During the Pakistan period, in the primary and middle stage of ducation (Class VI to VIII) *Islamiat* (Islamic religious education) was made compulsory subject. After independence the Education Ministry continued with the same policy. On 28 March 1975, Sheikh Mujib revived the Islamic Academy (which had been banned in 1972) and elevated it to a Foundation. The Mujib regime however, was brought to an abrupt end through his gruesome murder by a group of army officers on the night of 15 August 1975. With the change of regime, nationalism in Bangladesh also took an explicit turn toward religion.

The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman brought Islam oriented state ideology into prominence by shunning secularism and socialism. Religion re-emerged as an important factor in the country both socially and politically. After the fall of the 'socialist-secular-Bengali nationalist' Mujib government, his successors realized the importance of political Islam to legitimize their rule. There was no other option for them other than religion as secular front was already occupied by other party i.e. Awami League. For the next few years the military ruled government used religion and promoted it. Ziaur Rahman inserted religious principles in the constitution and remove secularism from it. By the proclamation of Order no.1 of 1977 'Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim was inserted at the beginning of the constitution above the preamble. Through the same proclamation, Article 8, clause 1 was substituted by

'the principles of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah, nationalism, democracy and socialism meaning economic and social justice, together with the principles derived from them..... shall constitute the fundamental principles of state policy'.⁹

Thus the principle of secularism, as set forth in Article 8 as one of the state principles was dropped from the constitution. Article 12, through which communal political parties were banned in Bangladesh, was also dropped from the constitution. Article 6 clause 2 stated that citizens of Bangladesh were now to be known as Bangladeshis instead of Bengalis. These changes were given effect through the Fifth Amendment to the constitution on April 1977. Changes were apparent in administrative policies as well. The Second Parliament of Bangladesh met on 21 May 1979 and started its session with recitation from the Quran only; previously citations were made from the holy books of all religions. Friday was declared a half-holiday. Thereafter a series of constitutional amendments and government proclamations led the body politic towards a process of Islamization. The erosion of the secular character of Bangladesh deepened when next President Gen. Ershad declared Islam as the state religion in 1988. The military dictators also supported the growth of the private Madrassah system known as the Quomi Madrassah. It is estimated that the number of such Madrassah now around the country is above 15,000 and they have an enrolment of over 2 million plus students. During both military and democratic regimes Islam and secularism controversy continues into deeper labyrinth. In 1990 there was a democratic wave in Bangladesh but that too could not sideline the rift. In 2008 general elections Awami League had promised that it would restore the secular character of Bangladesh polity by reinstating the original 1972 constitution. After forming the government the Awami League passed the 15th amendment in the parliament in 2011 and restored the secular principle in the constitution but at the same time also accepted Islam as the state religion. Moreover, during the election campaigns each of the main political parties (the AL, BNP and *Jamat e Islami*) appealed to people for votes using Islam and have done so in every subsequent election campaign.

Taking advantage of the weakness of the subsequent governments, the number of Islamic parties willing to replace the Bangladeshi secular legal system with *Shariah* law has allegedly risen to more than 100. After 9/11, Bangladesh was one of several bases for globally networked Islamists proclaiming a *Jihad* against the West as well as against democracy in Bangladesh. These include the banned Jamat-ul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB), responsible for a series of suicide bombings since 2005, Harakatul Jihad-i-Islami-Bangladesh (Huji-B) whose leader Fazlul Rahman, signed an official declaration of war against the USA alongside Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and other groups such as Jagrata Muskim Janata Bangladesh(JMJB) and Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh(AHAB). They share a rejection of the west and of Western values and call for the establishment of *Shariah* law throughout the country.

Treatment of Religious Minorities in Bangladesh:

With the rise of Islamism, Bangladesh has experienced a series of violent attacks by extremists. The victims have included besides religious minorities, secular bloggers, atheists as well as Ahmadis and Shi'a Muslims. A large number of the attacks targeting religious minorities in particular have subsequently been claimed by the organization Islamic State (IS)- a claim

vigorously denied by the Bangladeshi government. Furthermore, communal violence- long a problem for religious minorities continues to take place on a regular basis, driven by political rivalries expropriation and the apparent impunity enjoyed by perpetrators. Bangladesh trajectory in the decades since independence has seen a shrinking in its religious diversity, reflected in the relative decline of religious minorities from 23.1 percent of the population in 1971 to 9.6 percent present day- a contraction largely due to the mass migration of its Hindu population.¹⁰ This has been accompanied by the emergence of a majoritarian politics that has sidelined religious minorities from public life. Table-1 shows the composition of religious communities (%), from 1951-2011:

Table-1

	1951	1961	1974	1981	1991	2001	2011
Muslim	76.9	80.4	85.4	86.7	88.3	89.7	90.4
Hindu	22	18.5	13.5	12.1	10.5	9.2	8.5
Buddhist	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.6
Christian	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
Others	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1

Source: Based on official census estimates

Consequently, though the recent attacks have highlighted the lack of protection of minority rights in the context of rising extremism, their situation is also informed by wider structural issues within Bangladeshi society, including political instability and marginalization, social prejudice and economic opportunism. The variety of abuses they experience, from forced abduction and sexual assault to land grabbing and arson, have often seen the perpetrators go unpunished. In many cases, official policies have made religious minority rights more precarious rather than less: in the Chittagong Hills, for example, the government sponsored migration of Bengali settlers since the 1970s has led to increasing conflict with indigenous peoples who are predominantly Buddhist and Christian, as well as Hindu and animist, leaving many displaced from their ancestral land.

The Legal Context and Recommendations:

However, the government has become very alert over minority rights. The national legislation implicitly support the equal protection of minorities against violence and discrimination. The 1860 Penal Code explicitly condemns murder, rape, abduction and other abuses against all citizens, as well as the damage or defilement of places of worship and the disturbance of religious assembly- all threats impacting especially on minorities. Moreover, the Women and

Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, stipulates the security against kidnapping and rape. The passing of the Vested Properties Return (Amendment) Act in 2011 did Hindu families have the legal basis to reclaim their property.¹¹ At last, though better protection of minorities by law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities is essential especially as many previous abuses appear to have been carried out with their involvement, a wider process of social transformation is also needed with authorities investing greater efforts to challenge stereotypes and champion respect for all beliefs. This requires an environment that nurtures rather than repress freedoms, while ensuring the basic right to religious expression- a right that, in the current context of Bangladesh is increasingly under threat.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, religion is always been a sentimental and a tool of political play in this region since the very beginning of the colonial times. British colonial rules used it as a hegemonic tool and it was taken into the same way by the Pakistani rulers as well. In Bangladesh the flourish of religion was done in an obnoxious way and the political plays by the governments were terrible either. The scholars and intellectuals are howling for the idea of secularism but in reality that is blurred. This political plays turn out to be a lethal for the minorities. BNP and its 14 party alliance were never been good for the minority groups. Awami League, the most 'sensitive' party to them has been avoided several issues as well. It seems the parties in Bangladesh are more concerned about their own interests and they do not care about the present and future of the nation. The leaders of all parties should not close their eyes to this fact that internal instability can be very dangerous to the existence of the nation. They should shun their selfish interests and should work for the betterment of the common masses. This is a golden opportunity for them to correct their wrong doings otherwise nation will never pardon them.

References:

1. Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, p. 926
2. For details, see: Muhammad Abdur Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol.1: 1201-1576, Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi, 1963
3. Neerra Chandhoke, *Rethinking Pluralism, Secularism and Tolerance*, Sage Publications Ltd., London, p. 15
4. Anisuzzaman, *Creativity, Reality and Identity*, International Center for Bengal Studies, Dhaka, 1993, p.107
5. For details, see: Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1972
6. Government of Bangladesh, *Parliament Debates*, October 12, 1972, p.20
7. Government of Bangladesh, *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, Ministry of Law, Dhaka, 1972, p.5
8. Talukdar Maniruzzaman, “ Bangladesh Politics: Secular and Islamic Trends”, in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed., *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*, South Asia Publication, New Delhi, 1990, p.69
9. Government of Bangladesh, *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, Ministry of Law, Dhaka, 1991, p.9
10. For details see: R. R. Rozario and S. Uttom , Bangladesh, in M. Kelly (ed.) *On the Edge: Religious Freedom and Persecution across Asia*, Hindmarsh, SA, 2016
11. *The Daily Star*, ‘Declare no more properties as vested: rights activists’, 2 December 2014

Their religion, Islam, is however becoming a "minority" day by day. While Muslims in the West "in spite of being a minority" are enjoying their basic religious freedom, this basic right is increasingly being denied to the Muslims in Bangladesh while it continues to aspire to become a "uniquely secular" society. Based on a robust content analysis and interviews, the study shows that the current regime in Bangladesh has taken on a comprehensive policy of secularization with an aim to emasculate Islamic influence from political and social landscape of Bangladesh. This chapter analyzes state-sponsored secularization and Islamization in Bangladesh. Secularism interpreted by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (the founding president of Bangladesh) was the recognition rather... "Islamic Revivalism: The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23 (1): 173-181. Google Scholar. al-Ghalib, Muhammad Asadullah. 2005. *Ahl-i-Hadis Andolan Ki O Keno?* "Trampling Democracy: Islamism, Violent Secularism, and Human Rights Violations in Bangladesh." *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 8 (1): 1-33. Google Scholar. Islam, M. Nazrul, and M. Saidul Islam. 2018a. "Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh: Contesting the Dominant Narratives." *Social Sciences* 7 (37): 1-18. Google Scholar. As a result Bangladesh's minority communities have often considered themselves inferior to followers of the country's dominant religion. Many believed the court's original intention to review the case 28 years after the petition was filed, was aimed at containing the sudden rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country. Bangladesh has recently experienced a series of atheist blogger killings, attacks on Muslim sects like Shias and Ahmadis, religious minorities including Buddhists, Christians and Hindus. Bangladesh's march toward secularism was halted when the country's first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated with most of his family members, in a 1975 military coup. For the underlying dynamics of Bangladeshi politics suggest the slow rise of Islamism towards political power. Indeed, it is all too tempting to predict that - unless there is a rapid and unforeseen change - the outcome of the election (if indeed it takes place) will be less significant in statistical terms than as the culmination of the politics of expediency that has dominated the last six years. In that case, the real losers will be the 140 million people of the country and with them, the ideals of secularism and socialism on which the country was established in 1971. The winner, almost regardless of the results, will be the burgeoning Islamist parties which are unremitting in their ideological drive to establish an Islamic state refounded on sharia law.