

Political Islam in Bangladesh: From Faraidi Movement to Hefajat-i-Islam

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The sudden emergence of the militant fundamentalist Islamic group of Hefajat-i-Islam indicates the medieval Islamic activism which is still playing a pivotal role in ossification of the democratic and pluralist socio-political character of Bangladesh. Bengali nationalism which once built strong ties among 'Bangalees' is now turning moribund due to the naked interference by the state in civic and public sphere. This paper deals with the course of transformation of popular Islam into political Islam by using discourse analysis. The many-sided character of Political Islam has generated political turbulence that throws open a serious challenges to present state democracy in Bangladesh. The root of the problem is that most of the power practitioners in Bangladesh are autocratic power mongers ready to stoop low playing with religious sentiments of the people while banking on corrupt bureaucracy pushing the ordinary people in the receiving end. The present incarnation of political-fundamentalist Islam, which thrives on militancy, betrays the fundamental tenets of popular Islam.

Keywords: Bangladesh, political Islam, militancy, popular Islam, Hefajat-i-Islam, Western hegemony.

Introduction

Bangladesh, situated in the South Asian region, is an agro-based and one of the poorest, over populated country. It emerged on the basis of secular-socialistic principles in 1971, and its first constitution, framed in November 1972, had imposed a ban on the use of religion in politics (Riaz, 2004: 5). The country was a part of colonial India from 1757-1947 and a province of Pakistan (1947-1971) in post-colonial period. Although Bangladesh was born after a few months of freedom struggle on secular, socialistic principles Islam has time and again found a fertile playground in

the fields of social and political life of the country.

After the 9/11 attack, political Islam¹, fundamentalism, extremism became the cornerstone of discussion across the countries and continents. The Western world fundamentally altered its approach to Islam and the Islamic countries and the political Islam with its outlandish idea towards the state and government was gradually taken over by the forces who believe in vengeance, dogmatism, and killing and annihilation of anything 'anti-Islamic'. The contemporary Bangladesh is passing through a chaotic phase where the fundamentalists take recourse to suicide bombings in judicial courts, assaults on NGO workers, secular writers, female journalists, grenade attacks on foreign diplomats, and so on. The most worrying part is the emergence of new extremist groups.

This paper aims at understanding the factors that have contributed to the development of political Islam in Bangladesh. I have divided my paper into several sections. First, I aim to understand the features of political Islam during the colonial period. Second, I explore the forms of political Islam that operated in post-independent Bangladesh. Third, I examine the *modus operandi* of political Islam in Bangladesh in 1972-1990- period. Finally, I cover the niche of political Islam from 1990 to 2013. I have written this article using the framework of historical specificity. According to Alam 'the notion of historical specificity shows how, for any specific situation, a series of historical conjunctures has led to a distinctive configuration' (cited in Hasan, 2012: 156).

Political Islam in colonial Bengal

Historically, Islam was introduced in the South-Asian region through the military conquest by Seljuks and Mamluks (Hasan, 2012: 156). Islam had flourished especially during the period of Delhi Sultanate (1204-1342 AD). The process of Islamisation in this region was only possible by Muslim Sufis, saints, pirs and rulers by coming and settling down here. Eaton has recorded how the Sufis worked as important agents in the conversion of Hindu population, especially the low caste Hindus, into Islam (Eaton, 2000: 189). However, there are four hypotheses on Muslim preponderance in Bengal: Intervention of Muslim rulers, Reaction of the low caste Hindus against Brahmanical oppression, Reaction

of the Buddhists against Hindu oppression, Missionary activities of the Muslim saints [pirs] (Khan, 2012: 91). Thus the 'Popular Islam in India, in many respects, copied the essentials of Hindu beliefs, ideas, and social institutions and adjusted them to the Islamic system in a very strange way' (Karim, 1976: 115). But, this popular Islam which once adapted to local circumstances gradually lost its appeal after the consolidation of British rule.

India was plundered following the rules of 'primitive accumulation' by the British. On the social front they followed dual policy to maintain the division between the Hindus and Muslims. According to Karim, the British not only withdrew all favours that the Muslims enjoyed under the Mughal rulers, but began following a policy of hostility against the Muslim upper classes (Karim, 1956: 187). In reaction, the Indian Muslims took to ethnic/religious route to mobilisation in the form of Faraizi movement of 1818, Khilafat movement of 1919, Tariquah-i-Muhammadiyah movement of 1820s and '30s, Taaiyuni movement and, Ahl-e-Hadith and so on.

Faraizi movement was launched in 1818 on the basis of Quranic monotheism and sunnah. The Faraizi movement of nineteenth century of Bengal was led by Haji Shariatullah (1781-1840) of Faridpur district (Khan, 1985: 839; Khan, 1970: 123; Khan, 2012). The term Faraizi is derived from 'farz' meaning obligatory duties dictated by Allah (Khan, 1985: 839, Khan, 2012). Shariatullah preached a return to a more fundamental Islam, shorn of ritualistic appendages (Khan, 1985: 840). According to *Banglapedia of Bangladesh*,

Shariatullah made a pilgrimage to Makkah, stayed there for 20 years and studied religious doctrines under Shaikh Tahir Sombal, an authority of Hanafi School. Returning home he launched a movement to make the Bengal Muslims follow the true canons of Islam. The Faraizi movement spread with extraordinary rapidity in the districts of Dhaka, Faridpur, Bakerganj, Mymensingh, Tippera (Comilla), Chittagong and Noakhali as well as to the province of Assam. The movement, however gained the greatest momentum in those places where the Muslim peasantry were depressed under the oppressive domination of Hindu zaminders (landlords) and European indigo planters' (Khan, 2012).

Khan further states:

He insisted on the complete acceptance and strict observation of the pure monotheism of Islam and condemned all deviations from the original doctrines as shirk (polytheism) and bidat (sinful innovation). Even Shariatullah believed that India should be classified under the category of dar-ul-harb (non-Muslim state), since it was ruled by the British. Consequently, according to Shariatullah, Hanafi law dictated that congregational prayers (such as juma, id-ul-fitr and id-uz-zoha) could not be held so long as the British ruled the sub-continent' (Khan, 1985: 840).

This movement secured widespread support from Muslim masses but after the death of its leader the vigour of this movement gradually waned.

In the early nineteenth century, Shah Sayyid Ahmad (1780-1831) of Barelwi and Shah Ismail (1782-1831) led a Muslim revivalist movement called Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah movement. Both the leaders emphasized on the interpretation of holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet (Sm). Followers of Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah supported SUFISM and the need for having a spiritual guide for right kind of thought and action (Ahsan, 2012). One may recall that the Faraidi and Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah movements were especially favored by Bengali Muslims, because they maintained their link with both Hanafi school of law and mysticism while demanding penitence and return to the fundamental doctrines of Islam (Khan, 1970: 129). However, according to Ahsan (2012):

The Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah movement began in Northern India and reached Bengal during the 1820s and '30s. Sayyid Ahmad's visit to Calcutta in 1820 was marked by a gathering of about 10 thousands followers who came to meet him. He visited Calcutta once again in the next year on his way to Makka and he propagated his doctrines during his three months of stay there (Cited in Hasan, 2012: 157).

By the late 1820s one of Sayyid Ahmad Berelwi's disciples, Titu Mir (1782-1831) began another movement in rural Western Bengal (Jones, 2008: 23) about whom Khan (2012) writes:

While a student in the madrasa, Titu Mir grew up into a good gymnast and a renowned wrestler (pahlwan). He went on a pilgrimage to Makka in 1822 and came in close contact with the great Islamic reformer and revolutionary leader Saiyid Ahmad Bareilli who inspired him to free his fellow countrymen from un-Islamic practices and foreign domination. On his return from Macca in 1827 he started preaching among the Muslims.

The following points emerge out of a review of these early Islamic movements.

- a. A new form of idea was generated among the Indian Muslims to participate in *jihad* [sacred war] against the British, Hindu landlords, and the gomastahs and 'mujahid forces' were organised. The pragmatic material interest and religious faith were combined in such movements.
- b. The movements sparked of a great deal of enthusiasm among the Muslim masses in most parts of Bengal who experienced oppressions of different forms in their everyday life.
- c. For running these movements and saving Islam from 'adulteration and danger', an economic cell was formed to collect funds and support from various parts of the world.
- d. The movements often turned violent as it was against the British troops (e.g., Sipoy mutiny of 1857).
- e. Muslims were out to retain 'purity' of Islam by uprooting the influence of local religions thus scuttling the possibility of assimilation and harmony.

The multi-faceted outcome of the movements can be summed up as thus:

First, the Faraizi movement and Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah movements had brought about a sense of unity among the Muslims as they fought against the European indigo planters, Hindu landlords, and Zaminders and their associates who were looked into as a kind of class enemy. Besides, the movements aimed at regaining the lost political glory of Islamic reign. After all, they thought the British had wrested power from 'them', since they

had been the descendants of ancestors who had ruled India long (Ahmed, 2001: 15).

Second, the movements demanded (from the Muslim masses) an absolute conformity to a form of Islam that was Arab oriented (Hasan, 2011: 158)

Third and most important, these movements prompted a 'conflict in identity'. Those who had participated in the movements were both Bengali and Muslims - a conflict that returned time and again to shape the history of Bangladesh in later years (Hasan, 2011: 158)

In 1867, Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi (1833-1877) and Maulana Rashid Ahmed Gangohi (1829-1905) founded Darul Uloom (centre of the learning) popularly known as Deoband Madrasha (pl. madaris) near New Delhi. Darul Uloom was set up to teach and propagate political Islam which, later, influenced the Muslims in East Bengal. Both Nanautawi and Gangohi were deeply influenced by itinerant Islamic thinker Shah Wali Allah Dihlawi. The establishment of Deoband Madrasha in 1866 and raising it to an Uloom in 1867 was a calculated move of the orthodox ulamas to restore the lost glory of Islamic rule (Riaz, 2010: 81). Riaz argues Uloom was opposed to folk Islam, including Sufi tradition, and that of the Shi'as. The Ulama of Deoband not only adhered to Hanafi School, but also insisted that any deviation from taqlid was a serious matter of concern and must be confronted because it was no less bida't [innovation] (Riaz, 2010: 81).

The Jamiat-i-Khilafat-i-Hind (All India Khilafat Conference) and the Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Hind (Association of religious Scholars of India) under the shade of Deoband Madrasha were active political institutions during Khilafat movement, which was launched in 1919. Jamluddin Afghani, who came to India in the late nineteenth century to propagate pan-Islamic ideas, received a favorable response from some Indian Muslim leaders (Ahmed, 2012). After the destruction of the Caliphate in the Ottoman Empire, the ulemas had played a decisive role for echoing pan-Islamism in the Indian sub-continent. This movement had made various interventions in support of Turkey, even organizing funds for Mustafa Kamal's war (Sayyid, 1997: 61). The main reason for supporting the war in Turkey was that defending Turkey had become synonymous with defending Islam (Shah, 2001: 87). With a view to protecting

Islam, many meetings were held in different parts of India. Hakim Abdur Rauf, in his speeches, made references to the troubles in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and other Muslim countries, and suggested that the object of the British government was to drive out Islam from India (Shah, 2001: 102). Qureshi has stated that when the Khilafat movement (1918-24) was at its height, thousands of British Indian Muslims, under severe emotional stress, began to emigrate to the neighboring Muslim country of Afghanistan (Qureshi, 1979: 41). Basically, in Bengal, the Khilafat-non-cooperation movement became a mass movement, which received the support of Gandhi, in which both Hindus and Muslims participated (Ahmed, 2012). But, within a short time, this mutual understanding broke down followed by a period of communal violence which occurred due to internal and external factors.

The Faraizi and Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah movements were read as a threat to British rule in India. These Islamic revivalist movements were aimed at restoring pure Islamic practices; Khilafat movement was a pan-Islamic movement. The Muslim leaders realised that Islam can be used as a very powerful tool of mass agitation. The establishment of Deoband madrasa and the cultivation of orthodox ulema also encouraged the political Islam. On the other hand, observing a unique unity between Hindus and Muslims in Khilafat movement, the baffled and scared British administration resorted to the politics of 'divide and rule' by raising inflicting a sense of Bengali nationalism in Bengal and playing one community against the other in order to foment communal tension.

Political Islam and parochial Bengali Nationalism in East Pakistan

Nineteenth century Muslim nationalism in Bengal culminated in the formation of the Muslim League party in 1906 in Dhaka (Khan, 1985: 841). Most of the Muslim League leaders and common people, especially the peasant class, welcomed the partition of Bengal in 1905. Muslim elites and peasant classes lagged behind their Hindu counterparts in terms of Socio-economic and political standing and they thought they will have a say in Eastern Bengal. By that time Bengali politics, public affairs and large part of opportunities were virtually monopolized by the Hindu Bhadrals (gentlefolk). Muslim cultivators had to live with the oppressions of Hindu

zamindars, moneylenders, and policemen (Heehs, 1997: 122). Heehs further argues that when the British announced their intention to partition Bengal, Muslims readily agreed to the proposal and they thought they would have much to gain from the new administrative arrangement, i.e., the creation of a Muslim majority province in the East (Heehs, 1997: 122). According to Khan, 'Indeed, significant development did occur in East Bengal after 1905. New institutions of higher learning were established which led eventually to a significant expansion of opportunities for Bengali Muslims in the areas of administration, education, and business' (Khan, 1985: 841). The Hindus, in fear of losing their hegemony opposed the partition of Bengal. In some places, some Hindu-Muslim riots broke out. Subsequently, in the face of severe opposition the British administration annulled the partition of Bengal in 1911, which was read by the Muslim League as a Hindu-British conspiracy. Despite the provocation of Bengal partition, communal agitation triggered off in several region of India. This could be explicated with reference to major communal outbreaks of this period: Calcutta in 1918 and 1926, Dacca in 1926 and 1930, Pabna in 1926 and Kishoreganj in 1930 (Das, 1990: 24). Frequent outbreak of communal conflicts led the British government under Lord Curzon, to take steps to polarize the Hindus and Muslims on the basis of 'two nation theory'- India or Hindustan for the Hindus and Pakistan for the Muslims. The Muslim league wanted an independent Muslim home in the subcontinent. The subcontinent received its freedom from colonial rule 1947 while compromising with the two-nation theory.

The formation of Pakistan was the hope of Bengali Muslims for stabilizing social, economic and political emancipation commensurate with their qualifications and strength. But within a very short time, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was transformed into a captive market and population and powerful West Pakistanis established a kind of neo-colonial rule. While opposing the domination of West Pakistan the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan tried to find a solution in Bengali linguistic nationalism. The emergence of Pakistan in 1947 was accompanied by a strong assertion of Muslim nationalism and an emphasis on Islam as the basis of identity and unity, binding together disparate groups (Murshid, 2007: 06). Islam has summed up the situation as thus: 'Here was a nation united by the common belief of its people in

the religion of Islam but at the same time a fragmented conglomeration of people speaking different languages, following different customs, belonging to different ethnic groups and even living in geographically non-contiguous territories (Islam, 1981: 57). In East Pakistan the Bengalis, irrespective of their religious affiliation, got united under the leadership of Awami Muslim League, which was later renamed Awami League with a secular touch. It is important to remember that the Jamaati-i-Islami was the only organized political force in former East Pakistan which rode on Islamic nationalism and was opposed to the secular forces and ideologies (Kabir, 1990: 121). Jamaat-e-Islami ('Jamaat') was formed in 1941 and it became a leading political organization in East Pakistan in the 1950s (Kumar, 2009: 542). Jamaat had emerged as the principal force on religion-based politics, although its leading leaders such as Golam Azam (who was educated both in a religion and secularism) and Maulana Mawdudi had supported Bengali nationalism as well. Golam Azam was among the early leaders who had submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan demanding that Bangla be made a state language along with 'Urdu' (Hossain and Siddiquee, 2004: 386). For this, 'He was imprisoned in 1952 for his role in the language movement and he again suffered imprisonment in 1955 for speaking out against political repression by the Pakistan government' (Rahim, 2001: 239). Therefore, in the era of language movement we find, political Islam merged with the echo of Bengali nationalism. The ideology of Bengali nationalism sharply turned into an ethno-centric ideology in the liberation war in 1971. Jamaat was sympathetic to the united Pakistan because of religion. Therefore, it sided Pakistan, with arms and weapons supplied by the Pakistan Army, the Jamaat organized the Al-Badr, Al-Shams, and Razakars and fought pitched battles against the Mukti Bahini (freedom fighter), guerrillas, and acted hand-in-hand with the Pakistan army in carrying out one of the largest genocides in recent history (Hossain and Siddiquee, 2004: 387).

Political Islam in Independent Bangladesh (1972-1990)

Almost a year-long armed struggle and unprecedented loss of life saw the defeat of united religion-based Pakistan, and the birth of Bangladesh on 16 December 1971. A new Constitution came into

force on the principles of democracy, secularism, nationalism, and socialism; secularism was announced as one of the fundamental principles of state policy (Ahamed and Najneen, 1990; Riaz, 2004, 2008; Murshid, 2007: 11; Devine & White, 2012: 130). But soon Mujib found himself under increasing pressure from the Awami Ulema, a vocal and powerful section of Islamists within his party, for the reversal of secularist decisions that he and a few leaders around him had made on their own without widespread consultations (Khan, 1985: 845). So, Mujib eventually reversed himself and made Bangladesh more Islamic than before (Khan, 1985: 845). Towards the end of his rule, he thus made frequent references to Islam in his speeches and public utterances by using terms and idioms like Allah (the Almighty God), Inshah Allah (God willing), Bismillah (in the name of God), Tawaba (penitence) and used to end his speeches saying Khuda Hafiz (may God protect you) while dropping his symbolic valedictory expression Joy Bangla (Glory of Bengal) (Moniruzzaman, 1990: 73-74).

After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with his family members in 1975, the first military dictator, Ziaur Rahman came to power illegally with the help of army. Thus, the symbol 'Islam' made a massive and formal entry into the political arena. As a part of Islamization of politics he even removed secularism from the Constitution and replaced it with 'absolute faith and trust in Allah' and 'Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim' (in the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful) to give the Constitution an Islamic colour. Apart from the constitutional changes, other symbolic measures were undertaken such as the hanging of posters in government offices with quotations from the Quran, display of Quranic verses and prophet's advice in public places, the flying of Eid-Mubarak festoons beside the national flags on Eid festivals, issuance of messages by the head of state on government on religious programmes such as I'd-i-Miladunnabi, Shab-i-Barat, and Muharram and offering of munajat (prayer) on special occasions, the compulsory broadcasting of azan (call to prayer) five times a day broadcast on state-owned radio and TV, creation of a new ministry of Religious Affairs, establishment of Islamic Foundation with research facilities, setting up of an Islamic University with an Islamic Research Centre attached to it (Ahamed and Nazneen, 1990: 796-797, Karim, 2004: 294-295). The policies of the Zia regime vis a vis Islam was one of cautious ambivalence; but that of Ershad

was a conscious effort to turn the cycle back to Islam-based nationalism (Husain, 1990: 143). The second military dictator, General Ershad, took several measures in continuing the process of Islamization. He established a national zakat board to collect tax in accordance with Islamic teachings, introduced Arabic and Islamiat in the schools, beginning with class one, emphasized on the cultural life of Bangladeshis based on Islamic principles. He made frequent visits to various shrines and mosques and extended financial support to these religious institutions, supported the pirs (holy men) and imams (religious leaders), declared Friday the weekly holiday, introduced prayers on national TV, declared Islam the state religion of Bangladesh through the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution on June 7, 1988 (Ahamed and Nazneen, 1990: 797; Karim 2004: 296). Both Zia and Ershad found in religion an important tool for legitimation of their rule.

The Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic political parties which were banned after the independence of Bangladesh on the basis of the constitutional principle of secularism were re-legitimized by Zia who allowed them to participate in electoral politics. With 'secularism' being dropped from the Constitution and Islam being made the state religion, Jamaat-e-Islam, the leading fundamentalist party in Bangladesh, began its activities and within a very short time it succeeded in establishing itself as a formidable force through its organizational activities and militant programmes.

The introduction of Islam in the public life of Bangladesh and the emergence of JIB as a formidable political force are inter-connected (Hasan, 2011: 161). After the independence of Bangladesh, this country had to face mounting financial difficulties. So Bangladesh had to seek aid from oil-rich Middle East countries, West Asia, and North Africa. In the middle of the 1970s when the oil prices had soared these countries accumulated enough wealth to support the groups that worked for the spread of political Islam. With all the wealth in their hands these countries targeted economically vulnerable countries like Bangladesh. Ahamed & Nazneen argue that some of them had made efforts to shape the world the way they wanted, financing missionary programmes in various Muslim countries (Ahamed and Nazneen, 1990: 806). The proliferation of Islam-based institutions and organizations, mainly of a charitable and missionary character, and the construction of new mosques

and madrasa along with the repair, extension, and beautification of old ones could be widely noticed (Ahamed and Nazneen, 1990: 806). During the Zia regime (1975-1981), the influence of the Middle Eastern countries, especially that of Saudi Arabia, on Bangladesh increased enormously. While only 78.9 million US dollars were given to Bangladesh as aid by these states, including Saudi Arabia, during 1971-1975, the amount rose to 474.7 million during 1976-81 from the same sources (Kabir, 1990: 125). Kabir argues that the political interests of the Zia regime combined with internal social pressures and external influences from its new found Arab friends encouraged the rapid growth of religion-based politics in the country (Kabir, 1990: 125).

India-Pakistan proxy-war was the second major factor for emergence of political Islam in Bangladesh. The ongoing hostility between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir issue is the hotspot for many years. An indigenous movement for self rule in Kashmir took militant shape in 1989 (Riaz, 2008: 77). Extra judicial killings, custodial deaths, excessive use of force, torture, rape, and arbitrary arrests by the Indian forces and the widespread rigging of the 1987 legislative elections all contributed to the radicalization of the movement (Riaz, 2008: 77). Riaz states that after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan came in the open in its patronage to militant groups like Lasker-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad among others in Kashmir (Riaz, 2008: 77). This proxy-war instigated the rise of Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh as well.

Thirdly, the sudden rise of national and international support to the madrasas in Bangladesh hugely contributed to spread the message of political Islam and consolidation of Islamic orthodoxy. Over a period of 32 years (1972- 2004), the number of post-primary madrasas grew by 732 percent (Kumar, 2009: 543; Karim, 2004: 297; Riaz, 2008: 37). Between 1983 and 1993, the growth was almost 100 percent (Riaz, 2008: 38). In the same period the growth of Dakhil madrasas has been an astounding 1103 percent (Kumar, 2009: 543; Riaz, 2008: 38). Over the same time, enrolments in primary schools doubled but those in Dakhil madrasas increased thirteen times; per head public expenditure on students of the government middle class educational institutions was Tk. 3000 as against Tk. 5000 in madrasas (Barkat, 2013: 10). The Aliya madrasa

- a government supported and supervised institution modeled after the Calcutta madrasa - included Bangla, English, Math, and Science apart from theology in its textbook curriculum. Thus the Islamic forces maintained strong control over various public and private universities throughout Bangladesh. On the other hand, the Qwami madrasa - officially unrecognized madrasa modeled after the Deoband madrasa - focuses exclusively on religious education and runs without government support. This auto generated Islamic scholars are not capable of coping with the demands of the competitive world. Karim estimated that the Quomi madrasa number around another 15000 and unofficial sources estimate that they have an enrollment of more than two million students (Karim, 2004: 298). While these madrasas do not accept government funds, they have received patronage from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and also receive private donations from overseas Bangladeshis residing in the United Kingdom and the Middle East (Karim, 2004: 298). After returning home, many Bangladeshis patronize the private Qoumi madrasa. Those with interest in politics also support the madrasas in order to garner votes in local elections (Karim, 2004: 298). The widespread poverty in the country makes way for the global Islamic forces to penetrate deep into rural Bangladesh and make them easy prey for the fundamentalist forces which operate with massive money power and sophisticated organizational skill.

Political Islam in contemporary Bangladesh

After the surrender of military dictator Ershad in the face of a mass upheaval in 1990, the journey of democracy to Bangladesh took a new turn, because it was common people who expressed their anger aloud. But after the four parliamentary elections in 1991s, 1996s, 2001s, and 2008s under the caretaker Governments, Bangladesh's democracy is still in paradoxical mess and unfathomable inconsistency. Democracy in Bangladesh is still tottering because of several factors like a) irreconcilable division between the parties; b) lack of internal democracy within the parties; d) weak of political institutions; e) widespread social and economic inequality; and f) corruption (Barkull). Use of muscle power and lumpenisation of politics, annihilation of the political opponents are part of everyday political life in Bangladesh. In order to improve the situation many foreign organizations and agencies

with specialized knowledge enter Bangladesh to work in the areas of women's advancement, poverty eradication, good governance, human development, social protection and so on. Previously many Middle Eastern countries used to be major allies of Bangladesh in terms of disbursing foreign aid during the army regime, but with the formation of a democratic government in 1990s, many Western countries have started taking their place (Hasan, 2011: 162).

After the attack on Twin Tower in 2001, Islamic militant activities have dispersed globally and Bangladesh is no exception. In Bangladesh alone while the number of Islamic organizations was only 11 in 1970 the number has increased to 100 in 2006 (Riaz, 2008: 29). Though the Islamist parties have increased in number in recent years, only seven of them are politically active. These are JIB, Islamic Front Bangladesh, Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan, Bangladesh Muslim League, Jaker Party, Jomiote Ulamaye Islam Bangladesh, and Islami Oikko Jote (IOJ). However, among these Islamic parties, in the 1991 election the JIB and the IOJ won 18 and 1 seat respectively out of 300 seats; in the 1996, 2001, elections, the same parties owned 3 and 1 seat, 17 and 2 seats respectively. In the ninth national parliamentary election, which was held in 29 December, 2008, the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) won only 29 seats while its former alliance, the JIB was the only Islamist parties to open its account with only 2 seats. On the other hand, BAL (Bangladesh Awami League) popularly known as the mainstream secular party with centre-left ideology, headed by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, received a massive mandate winning 230 seats in 2008 election. These facts show that Islamic groups that adopt violent means are not at all popular in Bangladesh.

Yet political Islam which receives patronage from global players is looked into as an alternative mode of politics which is heavily based on religious fundamentalism and is strong enough to sabotage the process of consolidation of modernist democracy. Many clandestine religious extremist groups maintain their fundamental doctrinal breeding by trans-national channels which strengthen their roots in contemporary Bangladesh. The extremist groups dream of establishing a sharia-based Islamist nation.

In 2002 Bertil Lintner warned that Bangladesh will gradually be taken over by religious extremism. Some sources have identified

33 Islamic extremist groups in Bangladesh. Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI-B), one of the most extremist groups, came into limelight through a press conference held at the Jatiya Press Club (in Dhaka) on 30 April, 1992, pressing for converting Bangladesh into an Islamic state (*South Asia Terrorism Portal* [SATP], 2013). According to Kabir, there are more than 15000 militant activists belonging to the Harkatul Jihad; few of them were government officials. This organization has trained 25000 youths in the last 14 years. They introduce themselves as 'Banglar Taleban' (Taliban of Bengal). In 2001 election campaign they used this provocative slogan: 'Amra hobo Taliban, Bangla hobe Afgan' (we will be the Taliban, Bangladesh will become Afghanistan) (Datta, 2007: 158). The group has become notorious for masterminding violent attacks on the Hindu minority in Bangladesh as well as on moderate Bengali Muslims (Lintner, 2002). After receiving death-threat from Harkat the Muslim writer Taslima Nasrin fled the country. The outfit organized an attack on the British High Commissioner in Bangladesh in May, 2004, and made an attempt to murder the popular poet Shamsur Rahman at his residence on 18 January 1999. It organized another grenade attack on an Awami League rally in Dhaka on 21 August 2004 killing 23 people, and organized a failed attempt to assassinate Shaikh Hasina (Lintner, 2002, 2002; *The Daily Star*, 2007: 1; Bhattacharya, 2011; SATP, 2013). The Harkat group has links with banned Islamic militant groups in Pakistan (like Jaish-e-Muhammed, and Loskar-e-Toiba) and in the Middle East (Lintner, 2002).

Bangladesh's main militant outfit, the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami was formed in 1992, allegedly with financial support from Osama Bin Laden himself. There are close links between this group and Al Qaeda, which has officially declared a 'holy war' against the United States on February 23, 1998. The other notable signatories to the declaration were Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri (leader of the Jihad Group in Egypt), Rifa'i Ahmad Taha Aka Abu Yasir (Egyptian Islamic Group), and Sheikh Mir Hamzah [Secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan] (Lintner, 2002). Following the ban of Huji by USA, in 2002, Bangladesh government banned it on 17 October, 2005 (*The Daily Star*, 2007: 1). Even after the ban Huji activists operate in Bangladesh using different names. Some sources claim that the banned outfit members of Huji-B are operating under a new name: Tamirut-at-Deen (*bdnews* 24, October 7, 2013)

Another militant group JMB (Jamaatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh) was formed in 1998. The JMB opposes democracy but propagates establishment of Islamic rule in Bangladesh; the leave leaflets at various bombing spots which include statements about their objectives. The supporters of this group threw bombs at two separate cultural events in Sherpur and Jamalpur on 12 January 2005, and on jatra (band of cultural troop) performances at Bogra Natore on 15 January 2005 (Singh, 2006: 2). This group organized 500 bomb explosions within a span of 30 minutes throughout Bangladesh on 17 August 2005 (Riaz, 2008: 98; Datta, 2007: 145). Later in 2005, it targeted the country's judiciary - court buildings, judges, and government officials - while pressing for a demand for immediate release of around 400 JMB suspects, arrested after the August countrywide blast (Roul, 2011). Under the severe pressure from donors and diplomatic wings, Khaleda-Nijami government banned the JMB on 23 February 2005. Riaz (2008) argues that the militants of JMB or JMJB (Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh) were trained in Afghanistan, Pakistan and that explains how they could organize nation-wide bombing. The execution of seven of its captured members by Bangladesh government in 2007 could not arrest their activities. On 5 January 2011, an unknown member of JMB threatened to assassinate Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and to blow up Chittagong Central Jail and the Chittagong court building unless the demand for release of JMB cadres within a month was met by the authorities (*Daily Star* 2011: 1). In 2012, five top leaders of JMB were arrested on charge of plotting to foil the ongoing war crimes trial by destabilizing law and order (*Daily Star*, 2012: 1).

Another global Islamist party Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) was formed in 1953 by Islamic thinker Takiuddin Al Nakhani. The main objective of this party is to establish Khalifah State which will be based on Islamic principles. In Bangladesh, it launched its chapter as Hizbut Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB) on 17 November 2001 (Hasan 2011: 164). Most of the workers of this organization are University teachers and students. Muhiuddin Ahmed is the kingpin of HUT in Bangladesh, who teaches in Dhaka University, wherefrom he not only continues his notorious activities but also recruits and motivates university and madrasa students for *jihad* against USA, West and Jews (Lintner, 2002; Choudhury, 2008). This outfit attacked the then Bangladesh British High Commissioner on 21

May 2004 (*Daily Star*, 2008: 1). One of its pamphlets titled 'how the *khilafat* will solve Bangladesh's Economic Crisis' argues that the present democratic system does not work for the welfare of the vulnerable people of Bangladesh. It also claims that the crises that face the Bangladeshis are the result of a conspiracy worked out by the Western forces and this justifies *jihad* against the West. This outfit has been banned in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Pakistan, Tunisia, Libya, Turkey, the former Soviet states of Central Asia, and in Bangladesh on October 22, 2009 for carrying out anti-state, anti government, anti-people, and anti-democratic activities (Hasan, 2011: 101).

Rapid growth of foreign Muslim NGOs under the shade of humanitarian works has become a means to supply foreign money to the indigenous extremist Islamist groups in Bangladesh. Some 575 registered Islamic NGOs were active all over the country in 2005 which receive funds from Libya, Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Egypt, India, Pakistan, USA and UK (Kumar, 2009: 905). It is estimated that 34 major foreign funded Islamic NGOs annually receive 200 crore (approximately 40 million dollar) from donor countries/organizations (Riaz, 2008: 85; Kumar, 2009: 905). At least ten NGOs were identified for channeling funds for various Islamists extremist outfits in the country (Kumar, 2009: 906). The controversial UK based NGO, Green Crescent, came into spotlight after the Rapid Action Battalion unearthed a mini-ammunition factory inside a madrasa-cum-orphanage in remote village of Vola on March 24 2009 (Kumar, 2009: 906). These NGOs construct mosques, madrasas, orphanages-cum-madrasas, diagnostic centre, educational institutions, financial institution throughout Bangladesh and most of them have been proved to be the centers of militant activities. Barkat has pointed out that the economic institutions run by the Islamic fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh, earn 54.2 million US dollar annual net profit where as NGOs 41.6 earn million (Barkat, *Secular Voice Bangladesh*). The militant outfits thus operate with a very strong economic support base and this gives them power to influence poverty-stricken average Bangladeshi Muslims.

'Hefajate Islam Bangladesh' (protector of Islam) is another Islamic extremist organization that came into media spotlight in 2011. HIB is a quomi madrasa based organization and its headquarters is in

Chittagong, the port city of Bangladesh. This fundamentalist organization is headed by Ahmad Shafi, the director of Darul-Ulum-Moinul-Islam (Hathazari madrasa) and its Nayeb-e-Ameer is Mufti Izharul Islam Chowdhury. This madrasa was modeled after Darul Uloom Deoband. This organization opposed the 2009 Women Development Policy, which proposed to grant Muslim women equal rights to inheritance, the secular education policy and propagated religion-based politics. In 2013 the HIB came to the surface opposing the 'Shahbag Movement'² which was demanding capital punishment for Bangladesh Liberation War criminals and a ban on the Jamaat-e-Islami (its top leaders are under trial on war crime charges). Abdul Kader Mollah, one of the war criminals, has already been hanged. The HIB supported the collaborators of Pakistani army in 1971 who were executed under International War Tribunals. Even they tagged the organizers, bloggers (albeit, most of them even do not know what 'blog' is and 'bloggers' are), online activists who were supporters of this movement as 'atheist' and demanded their immediate arrest for defaming Islam. Hefajat burst into the political scene in 2013 with its 13- point charter of demands. The demands, included among others, inclusion of the phrase 'Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah' in the Constitution as one of the fundamental principles of state policy, legislation for providing death penalty for blasphemy, scrapping of laws of women rights and the proposed education policy, declaration of Qadianis (Ahmadiyyas) as non-Muslim, banning of all foreign culture including free mixing of men and women and candlelit vigil, stopping of anti-Islamic activities by NGOs and by Christian missionaries at Chittagong Hill Tracts, banning of setting up sculptures at intersections, colleges and universities across the country. Historically speaking, Hefajat's demands and its implementations follow the legacy of JIB which wants to convert Bangladesh into a Talibanized, Islamic country.

In support of its 13-point demand, HIB organized a long march on 6 April 2013 from Chittagong, Sylhet, and Rajshahi to Motijheel area in Dhaka where more than a million people had gathered. Taking a violent turn the members attacked at a rally of 'Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee' in Dhaka from their procession, attacked 'Projonmo Chattar' in Shahbag and even beat up a female journalist of Ekushe TV, named Nadia Sharmin because of her presence in male gatherings. On 5 May 2013 the members of the same outfit

clashed with police in Dhaka right after the mid-day prayer, uprooted numerous trees from road dividers, damaged the small shops of pavement hawkers, set fire to the office of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), vandalized and torched many vehicles and even burnt thousands of Quran, Hadith, and many religious books adjoining Baitul Mukarram National Mosque. Those who claim to be the 'keepers of Islam' had set fire to almost 55 bookstores destroying more than 55000 books (bdnews 24, May 6, 2013). These programmes, which perpetrated unprecedented violence, were organized jointly by HIB, JIB and BNP (*Daily Star*, 2013: 7, *Prothom Alo*, 2013: 11). HIB has been supported and financed by JIB (*Prothom Alo*, 2013: 11). Like JIB, HIB also emphasizes on the establishment of Taliban style rule in Bangladesh. Most of these organizations have direct links with global militant outfits. Maulana Habibur Rahman, a madrasa principal of Sylhet, one of the main organizers of Hefajat-e-Islam's Dhaka long march, revealed his links with Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami and his meetings with Osama Bin Laden. In one of the interviews Habibur gave a detailed account of his visit to Afghanistan in 1988 (*Daily Star*, 2013: 1). He said, 'An invitation from Harkat-ul-jihad al Islami made it possible for me to make the fortunate trip to Afghanistan.... Those of us who visited the Afghan war fields during the trip are Shaikhul Hadith, Aatur Rahman Khan, Sultan Jaok, Abdul Mannan, Habibullah, myself and three others' (Ibid). Hefajat Nayeb-e-Ameer Mufti Izharul Islam Chowdhury, who were linked with Huji, set up a private funded madrasa in Chittagong. In this madrasa a hand-made bomb exploded when students of that madrasa were making bombs (*Daily Star*, 2013: 1).

JIB and HIB are now under some pressure, since BAL government has started prosecution of long awaited trial of 1971 war criminals. Most of the war criminals are the leaders JIB of whom one is already hanged on 12 December, 2013 after 42 years of liberation of the country; other war criminals are awaiting trial and punishment. If all war criminals are punished morale of some of the extremist outfits will break.

The fundamental observation in this section is that the militant organizations which propagate political Islam are out to destabilize the democratic-secular-modernist fabric of Bangladesh. Most of the militant outfits have external links and are heavily funded by

some global Islamic organizations and this makes the task of handling these outfits difficult for the secular-democratic forces and the state. The rise of political Islam or the phenomenon called 'Islamnationalistic' has been aptly summed up by Muhammad Ayoob as thus:

Political Islam is a modern phenomenon, with roots in the socio-political conditions in the Muslim countries in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The attraction of political Islam increased as the government elites failed to deliver on their promises of economic progress, political participation, and personal dignity to expectant populations emerging from colonial bondage (Ayoob, 2004: 2).

Furthermore, Ayoob emphasizes the conflicting relation between the 'political Islam' versus 'hegemonic West' (Ayoob, 2004: 2). In present day Bangladesh, which is marked by persisting economic discrimination, lack of political participation, and lack of security, there is little hope of peaceful democratic society. In the absence of economic emancipation the common masses often fall prey to militant groups. One can note that a large number of activists of Hefajat represent the rural poor who do not have access to any form of capital (economic, social or political). The state does not do enough to secure their fundamental rights. No surprise, Bangladesh has achieved three time championship for being the most corrupt countries in the world according to the Transparency International. Corruption gives space to injustice, radicalization, whereas insecurity makes people God-fearing. In this context I would quote Hossain, who has said: 'The spread of corruption, the inefficiency and degradation in government services and the ensuing waning of confidence in the political system have created a fertile ground for groups outside the government to supply social and economic services, which are delivered along with ideas, values, and cultural elements in conformity with the radicalizers' ideology' (Hossain, 2007: 24-25).

Conclusion

Looking at the historical records since the beginning of 19th century one can notice that the seeds of political Islam were sown in the colonial period in the Indian subcontinent. The British

miscalculations and the policy of playing one religious community against the other, the Islamic revivalist movements, setting up of Islamic institutions, pan-Islamic movements, Global oil crisis of 1970s, the patronage of the Islamic organizations by the oil rich countries of the Middle East, Soviet-Afghan war in the 1990s, the 9/11 attack, the Kashmir war, the establishment of close links, both material and ideological, between the local militant groups with militant groups that work globally, and Western hegemony, the economic vulnerability of the masses in Bangladesh and many more factors have contributed to the proliferation of political Islam in Bangladesh. In colonial period, the exploited ordinary Muslim peasants formed 'Mujahid forces' in the name of Islam to express their anger against the exploiters. The tenacious bigot ulemas took initiatives in setting up Deoband madrasas in every corner of the country for imparting ideological and extremist training. The 'khilafat' movement was another turning point for the spread and consolidation of political Islam; the Deobandis were the key players for popularizing pan-Islamism in Bengal. The oil-rich Middle-east countries provided generous financial support for establishing madrasas, and mosques with a plan to keep political Islam alive. The youth of Bangladesh received commando training in Pakistan from the Talibans in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan fought alongside the Afgan Talibans against Socialist (most of the Muslims of Bangladesh believe socialist means 'infidel') Soviet in 1990s, and then returned home as Gaji, to work for the international militant organizations like Huji, JMB.

However, the strength of the average Bangladeshis is that they favour democracy, pluralism, peace and tolerance and other ideals of modernism. The state draws support from the democratic spirit of the large majority of Bangladeshis and takes recourse to administrative and legal and political means to corner the disruptive forces, both local and global. The interference of the global players, both Islamic and non-Islamic (Western), makes the task of sustaining democratic political ethos difficult. Shahbag movement, the trial and conviction of the war criminals are some the silver linings in the recent history of Bangladesh.

Notes

1. Although the term 'political Islam' is much more disputed, it is used here to exemplify multifarious unprecedented irruption of contemporaneous

domestic politics where Islam is being put to use for political purposes by Islamic scholars as well as Islamic political parties.

2. 'Shahbag movement' is a non-violent, secular-humanistic, and a mass awakening civil society's movement designated by 'bloggers and online activists' networks'. This movement was basically born to vehement the rejection of the International Crime Tribunal's (ICT) verdict to condemn Abdul Qader Mollah, Assistant General Secretary of Jamaat-i-Islam to lifetime imprisonment and people demanded he who killed hundreds of people and raped a young girl during Bangladesh's Liberation war, to be put to death.

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