“Bengali” and “Bangladeshi”: The use of Islamic and Secular Identities in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bengalisis today are experiencing two separate and conflicting types of nationalism and collective identity. There are those who support the ideology of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP in alliance with Jamaat-i-Islami) who define Bangladeshi identity based on religion and territoriality and those who support the ideology of the Awami League (AL) who define Bengali identity on the basis of ethnicity, language and secularism. Adherence to or rejection of these ideologies has given rise to the secular Shahbag Movement and the Islamist movement of the Hafazate-i-Islam in 2013, bringing questions of identity and nationhood in Bangladesh to the forefront.

The paper analyses the key pledges in each national election campaign since 1991 and most recently in the 2013 City Corporation Polls by the BNP and the AL and their allies in order to establish how ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ has supported the political parties to alternate power. The paper concludes that these two competing ideologies have very little policy impact for the political parties and for Bangladesh. I argue that collective memory is re-imagined by political parties in order to justify their position, differentiate themselves and mobilize electoral support.

1. Introduction

The birth of Bangladesh came from two separate secessionist movements.

The initial separation of Pakistan from India was based on the ideology of the two-nation theory. The subsequent separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan was based on a rejection of that communal ideology in favor of linguistic nationalism and a secular ‘Bengali’ identity. Since then, another type of nationalism described as ‘Bangladeshi’ nationalism based on religion and territoriality has also been introduced in Bangladesh. Writing in 1987, Kabir had commented that ‘nationalist development in Bangladesh over the
past half century is a fascinating case of remarkable identity change’. This remains correct today and according to most observers, ‘Bangladesh continues to be riven by conflict and dissent over what constitutes the fundamentals of its nationhood’.

To date, the two major political parties in Bangladesh, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), campaign, mobilize, win support and elections on the basis of the two ideologies of ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ respectively, despite narrowing differences in the policies of the two parties. While theories of nationalism are varied and conflicting, this paper lends support to the broader modernist claim, with particular attention to how Breuilly’s theory of nationalism as politics and power and Brass’s instrumentalism can be seen to have manifested in the conflicting versions of nationalism championed by the political elite in Bangladesh. Brass writes that ‘the study of ethnicity and nationality is in large part the study of politically induced cultural change. More precisely, it is the study of the process by which elites and counter-elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group’s culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests, and to

compete with other groups\textsuperscript{3}. The Bangladeshi narratives of nationalism has always been propagated and manipulated by the political elite in an instrumentalist manner while using ethno-symbolic cursors such as language and religion\textsuperscript{4}. While Gellner and Anderson would argue that nations and nationalism are ‘fabrications’ and ‘imagined communities’\textsuperscript{5} respectively, the experience of Bangladesh shows that although nationalism has been defined, manipulated and exaggerated by the elite, the Bengali nationalism of the AL as propagated in the pre-liberation era was an organic inevitability because of the difference in ethnicity, language and culture between the two provinces of Pakistan. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi nationalism of the BNP was given voice under military rule with little scope for public consensus. However, despite elements of primordialism, the nationalist discourse in Bangladesh has always been politically motivated and instrumentalist.

In February of 2013, a culmination of the present day conflicts over national identity occurred in Shahbag and in the following violence perpetrated by the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and it’s student wing Islami Chatra Shibir. In 2008

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\textsuperscript{4} The ethno-symbolic approach sees nationalism as a modern instrumentalist phenomenon, which is however, dependent on a pre-existing texture of myths, memories, values and symbols.

when the current AL government came to power, one of their manifesto promises was to hold trials of those accused of having collaborated with the Pakistani army in the genocide of 1971, when Bangladesh fought her war of independence. Many of the JI leaders were members of the Al Badr, Razakar and Al Shams forces who were against the independence of Bangladesh and supported the Pakistan army by committing heinous crimes against Bengalis⁶. In 2009 the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) was set up by the AL government in order to try those Bangladeshis accused of war crimes. Though controversial, and often accused of being politically motivated most Bangladeshis were initially happy to finally have some sense of justice, and the AL had come to power with an overwhelming mandate.

On 5th February 2013, the ICT sentenced Qader Mullah, a leader of JI, to life imprisonment. Upon receiving a life sentence, Qader Mollah showed a victory sign on camera, which resulted in thousands of people, especially the youth, joining a rally at Shahbag. Those in Shahbag are demanding death penalty for Qader Mullah and all those accused of war crimes. They want Bangladesh to return to the ideologies, which had led to the separation from Pakistan and are demanding a ban on the politics of JI and a secular

Bangladesh. This is very much in the spirit of the ‘Bengali’ ideology propagated by the AL, which defines nationalism in Bangladesh on the basis of ethnicity, language and secularism. On the other hand, Jamaat followers have come out onto the streets and threatened the government with civil war, claiming that the War Crime Tribunals are partisan. Since 5\textsuperscript{th} February the death toll during hartals by Jamaat and its student wing Shibir has risen to unprecedented numbers. Jamaat, backed by BNP, are claiming that the war crimes tribunals are partisan and are campaigning for an Islamic state and Sharia law in Bangladesh. Although the BNPs policy do not go so far as to demand a Sharia state, it defines Bangladeshi nationalism based on religion and territoriality as opposed to secularism and ethnicity.

These strong sentiments about the identity and the nature of what Bangladesh and Bangladeshis stand for had begun forming since the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century and is still dividing the politics of Bangladesh today, resulting in severe electoral violence and lack of consensus between political parties. This paper analyses the key pledges in each national election campaign since 1991 and the 2013 City Corporation Polls by the BNP and the AL and their allies in order to establish how conflicting versions of nationhood based on ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ are still being propagated by political parties to capture power. In Bangladesh, collective memory is fabricated and exaggerated by political parties in order to create a platform, differentiate
themselves from other groups and mobilize support—despite very little
difference in the actual policies of the parties. Thus, conflicting versions of
nationalism in Bangladesh is used as a campaigning tool for the sake of
electoral gain. The paper shows how and why conflicting nationalisms have
developed in Bangladesh, both on the basis of language and ethnicity and on
the basis of religion, thereby contributing to the wider analysis of
nationalism.

The paper is divided into four sections. Part 2 discusses the historical
development of the two ideologies of ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’, showing
how one has been more ethno-symbolic while the other more imagined and
instrumentalist, Part 3 deals with the impact and importance of the use of
these two ideologies in coming to power even today by analyzing the
electoral campaign strategies of the BNP and AL since 1991 and attempts to
explain the role of these ideologies in the alternation of power, Part 4
examines what these ideologies really mean and attempts to discern their
practical implications, concluding that despite the use of conflicting versions
of nationalism based on religion and secularism, political parties have very
little difference in their policy towards either.

2. Historical Background: The Rise of ‘Bangalee’ and ‘Bangladeshi’
'Bangladesh was founded on a secular nationalist unity based on Bengali language and ethnicity, necessarily in direct contrast to the nationalism on which Pakistan was founded'.

From her creation, the one thousand miles between her Eastern and Western provinces and the difference in ethnicity, language and the ways of practicing Islam between the two regions, would make the governing of Pakistan a difficult undertaking. Within the first few years of Pakistan’s independence, East Pakistani politicians began accusing the West of major economic, social and political disparities and the first major conflict between the two wings occurred over the issue of national language. Bengalis felt their ethnicity come under attack by West Pakistan under the guise of religion. They felt that the Central Government was using religion as a tool to suppress East Pakistan’s language, tradition, culture and economy. For example in 1949 the Central Minister for Education openly proposed the introduction of Arabic script for Bengali. He argued that:

‘Not only Bengali literature, even the Bengali alphabet is full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess of Hindu pantheon ... Pakistan and Devanagari script cannot co-exist. It looks like defending the frontier of Pakistan with Bharati soldiers! ... To ensure a

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bright and great future for the Bengali language it must be linked up with the Holy Quran ... Hence the necessity and importance of Arabic script.\(^8\)

In 1948, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the first governor-general of Pakistan, visited Bangladesh and announced that East Pakistan must learn to speak Urdu, the working language of Pakistan. This resulted in large-scale resentment and protests amongst the Bengalis. As a response to the protest the Central government banned all public meetings. On 21\(^{st}\) February 1952 students at Dhaka University ignored the ban and organized a protest. Police clashed violently with the students and several Bengalis died. This became the decisive moment for Bengali people and further strengthened their resolve to maintain their distinctiveness from West Pakistani culture.\(^9\)

To resist cultural oppression, Bengalis started adhering to traditional Bengali customs such as singing Tagore songs and wearing bindis with greater fervor throughout the 1950s and 60s. West Pakistan saw customs and traditions observed by the east as acts of cultural resistance. And increasingly the Bengalis saw Central Government programs and attitudes as

an attack on their culture. The effort by East Pakistanis to preserve Bengali culture would eventually lead to the move for independence from Pakistan.

2.1 The Beginning of the Awami League and ‘Bengali’ nationalism

‘Secularism instead of Islam in addition to Bengali culture would be the basis of nationalism in Bangladesh’

In 1949, the Awami Muslim League was founded with an agenda to better represent the social, political and economic rights of the East Pakistanis. By the late 1950s the Awami Muslim League changed its name to Awami League (AL), and avowed a more inclusive and secular platform, inviting non-Muslim Bengalis into the party, a distinct move away from the religious basis for the formation of Pakistan. East Pakistan, led by the AL, began to establish a common bond based on ethnicity and the AL started to dress itself as a secular party in support of Bengali nationalism as a separate ideology from the ‘two-nation’ theory. Thus an ethno-history, or an imaginary reconstruction of the past was being painted with an ideal image of what East Bengal once was and the AL started adhering to a version of Bengali identity, which would more easily convey the message of national resistance. Hossain and Khan write that it is during this period that Bengali nationalist slogans became popular. Slogans such as, ‘Ekti Bangla Aksar,

Ekti Bangalir Jibon (every single letter of the Bangla alphabet epitomizes the life of a Bengali), Jago Jago Bangalee Jago (Wake up, Bengalis), Joy Bangla (Victory to Bangla), Amar desh, tomar desh/Bangladesh Bangladesh (Your home and mine is Bangladesh)\textsuperscript{*12}. The popularity of such slogans, coupled with the fact that before the creation of Pakistan, in the 1940s there had been talk of a United Bangla, suggest that the basis for nationalism propagated by the AL was not entirely imagined, but based on a pre-existing collective memory of shared ethnicity and language.

When Pakistan held it’s first general election in 1970 the AL won 167 of the 169 seats allocated to East Pakistan in the National Assembly and Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party won only 83 of the 131 seats allocated to West Pakistan. Yahya Khan, the then president, postponed the convening of the National Assembly refusing the AL the right to form a government although they had the majority of seats. This was unacceptable to the Bengalis, and on March 7\textsuperscript{th} 1971 Sheikh Mujib, the then leader of the AL, called for independence. Bangladesh won it’s independence on 16 December 1971 with support from India and the loss of 3 million Bengali lives, according to some estimates\textsuperscript{*13}.


\textsuperscript{13} Bangladesh Genocde Archive, <http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/>
Sheikh Mujib became the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the country’s constitution was based on his four principles – democracy, socialism, secularism and nationalism. Article 12 of the Bangladesh constitution reflected secular aspirations by stating communalism, state patronization of a particular religion, exploitation or misuse of religion for political purposes and discrimination against anyone following a particular religion would be ended\textsuperscript{14}. Accordingly all religious political parties were disbanded and Article 38 of the constitution stated ‘No person shall have the right to form or be a member or otherwise take part in the activities of, any communal or other association or union which in the name of or on the basis of any religion has for its object, or pursues a political purpose\textsuperscript{15}.

Article 6 stipulated that the identity of the citizens of Bangladesh would be ‘Bangalee’. Thus, in the first years of Bangladesh’s independence Sheikh Mujib’s ‘Bangalee’ was the basis on which identity was shared, the linguistic heritage of the East Bengalis took precedence over bonds of religion.

However, soon after independence the country began facing economic trouble further exacerbated by the famine of 1974. Many in Bangladesh saw the economic difficulties of the post-liberation years as Mujib’s personal

\textsuperscript{14} Article 12, Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972.

\textsuperscript{15} Article 28, Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972. For a detailed analysis of the original constitutional ban on religion based politics, the fifth amendment and the supreme court’s declaring the fifth amendment illegal, please see: Hashmi, Arshi Saleem, ‘Bangladesh Ban on Religion-Based Politics: Reviving the Secular Character of the Constitution’, spotlight on Regional Affairs, Institute of Regional Studies, February 2011.
failure and on 15 August 1975, he and most members of his family, were assassinated\(^\text{16}\).

2.2 The Rise of Islam: Constitutional amendments and political rhetoric

After eighty-four days of chaos following Mujib’s death, Ziaur Rahman, took control of the new regime and became Chief Marshall Law Administrator and president of Bangladesh. Ziaur Rahman amended the constitution and formulated a new concept of nationalism for Bangladesh in order to legitimize the new regime, differentiate it from Mujib’s regime and to garner support from the ‘Islamic’ leaning parties which had been banned and subverted right after the 1971 independence war\(^\text{17}\). Under Zia, the Second Proclamation Order No. 1 of April 23, 1977 amended Articles 6, 8 and 12 of the Constitution and also the preamble.

Article 6, which originally stipulated that the identity of the citizens of Bangladesh would be ‘Bangalee’, was amended to read ‘Bangladeshi’ thereby linking the identity of the nation to its territorial limit and separating it from the culture in West Bengal – which previously had been the basis for


\(^{17}\) Ali, Riyaja, ‘“God Willing”: The Politics and Ideology of Islamism in Bangladesh’, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Vol.23, Number 1&2 (2003), Page 310.
nationalism and had led to the struggle for independence. The words ‘historic struggle for national liberation’ in the preamble was changed to ‘historic war for national independence’, thus highlighting the military’s role in the Liberation War and minimizing the role of the civilian population. And most importantly, the word ‘secularism’ which appeared in the preamble and in Article 8 as one of the four fundamental principles of the state, was replaced with ‘Absolute Trust and faith in the Almighty Allah’ and a new clause was added stating that ‘absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah’ would be the basis of all actions. Article 12 and the definition of secularism were omitted and the words ‘Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim’ was inserted. During Zia’s regime, the Political Parties Regulations (PPR) Act was also promulgated. The Act allowed the post-1971 banned Islamist political parties (which had opposed the independence of Bangladesh and supported the Pakistan army, many of whose leaders are today leaders of the JI) back into mainstream politics and Zia held elections for parliament in February 1979 with the participation of the Islamist parties and his own Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)\textsuperscript{18}. Upon winning the election the 5th amendment to the constitution, which incorporated all the resolutions, decrees, proclamations, and orders issued under the authority of martial law into laws and parts of the constitution was passed.

\textsuperscript{18} Ali, Riyaja, ‘“God Willing”: The Politics and Ideology of Islamism in Bangladesh’, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East’, Vol.23, Number 1&2 (2003), Page 311.
The core of Zia’s ideology constituted of ‘religion, territoriality of identity and national security’, a far cry from the ethnic, linguistic and secular ideology, which led to the creation of Bangladesh. Zia successfully used the symbol of Islam to create a sense of identity for Bangladesh and the changed the basis of Bangladeshi nationalism.

Smith, in critiquing instrumentalist theories of nationalism, states that these theories which do not take into account the durability of ethnic ties or some element of ethno-symbolism cannot answer the following questions: ‘Can such manipulations hope to succeed beyond the immediate moment? Why should one invented version of the past be more persuasive than others?’

The two interpretations of nationalism in Bangladesh as had been propagated by the AL and Zia seem to support Smith’s claim in that neither has proven to be durable or more persuasive than the other. Even today Bangladesh often comes to a standstill because of the violence perpetrated by those who support the BNP’s claim of religion and territoriality being the basis of nationhood in Bangladesh and those who support the AL’s claim of ethnicity and secularism being the fundamental aspect of nationhood for Bengalis. Kabeer writes that the competing elites have manipulated these

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two symbols (language and secularism v religion) in succession so that the two form the ‘foci of identity in Bangladesh’\textsuperscript{20}.

### 3. The Democratic Era and the Politics of Culture: The Use of Conflicting Interpretations of Nationhood as Campaign Strategy

After the death of Ziaur Rahman and following a decade of authoritarian rule under Ershad (who also utilized Zia’s Islamic nationalism) democracy was reinstated in Bangladesh in 1991. Today Bangladesh is still experiencing two types of nationalism and collective identity. ‘Bangladeshi’ ideology is based on Islamic and territorial identity and is propagated by the BNP and the AL’s ‘Bengali’ ideology is based on a secular Bengali identity. Sufia M. Uddin writes that, ‘Through emphasis and omission, communities employ historical evidence to create a specific collective memory that legitimizes the existence of the new nation-state’\textsuperscript{21}. In Bangladesh, two competing collective memories have been constructed by the political leadership to lend legitimacy to their respective parties and electoral violence, politics of the street and the lack of acceptance of democratic institutions continue to be instigated by using these rivaling ideologies as and when it suits political parties. For example, the rhetoric that ‘the Awami League is ‘pro-Indian’ with a Bengali bent, and that the opposition BNP, if not ‘pro-Pakistani’, is


receptive to Islamic tendencies because of its alliance with the Islamic parties Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikkya Jote\textsuperscript{22} continues to be aired, and forms the basis of most electoral campaigns.

The electoral outcomes since the creation of Bangladesh would suggest that Bangladeshis alternate between the identity they associate with and political parties have paid lip service to both Islam and secularism, as well as allied with religious groups and leftist groups as per the dictates of political expediency. The following analyses the role of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ in each of the four democratic elections since 1991 and most recently at the City Corporation Polls of June 2013.

3.1 The 1991 Election

By the beginning of the democratic era in 1991, the major positions of ideological conflict were drawn between the ‘Bangladeshi nationalist’ BNP and the ‘Bengali nationalist’ Awami League\textsuperscript{23}. In the days preceding the 1991 elections both Sheikh Hasina, the present leader of the AL and Khaleda Zia, the current leader of the BNP, campaigned tirelessly, holding several public meetings each day in almost every district and sub-district town in

\textsuperscript{22} Andaleeb, Syed Saad and Irwin, Zachary T., ‘Political Leadership and Legitimacy amongst the Urban Elite in Bangladesh’, Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. 27, No.1, April 2004, Page 69.

Bangladesh. An analysis of the content of their speeches during the campaigns by Talukder Maniruzzaman showed that the main theme in Khaleda Zia’s speeches were the implementation of Zia’s nineteen point program, the negative aspects of AL rule between 1972 and 1975, the negative aspects of Ershad’s rule, village government, increasing food production, mass literacy drives, population control and canal digging in order to supply water to farmers. However, according to Maniruzzaman’s studies, the most crucial theme in Khaleda Zia’s speeches was the safeguarding of Bangladesh’s sovereignty from India. Khaleda Zia started each speech with the words Bissimilah-Ar-Rahmani-Rahim (in the name of Allah the Beneficent and the Merciful) and highlighted the islamic provisions incorporated into the Constitution by Ziaur Rahman. Sheikh Hasina spoke on similar themes, the key difference being that she spoke about building the Sonar Bangla that Sheikh Mujib had envisioned, the golden era (1972-75) of Sheikh Mujib’s rule, the punishment of the killers of Sheikh Mujib. And fatally in 1991, Sheikh Hasina promised a secular democracy and did not raise the issue of safeguarding Bangladesh from Indian expansionism.

The 1991 elections, with a voter turn out of 55.35 percent, resulted in the BNP winning 139 of the 300 seats and the AL winning only 88 seats. However, because of Bangladesh’s First Past the Post system, the fact that the percentage of the votes won by the BNP and AL were almost equal at about 31% for each party was not reflected. However, if the votes received by Jamaat and Jatiyo Party (both parties which also hold an ‘Islamic’ identity as opposed to AL’s secular identity) are added to the BNPs vote bank in 1991, it would seem that 54.13 percent of voters preferred the Islamic Orientation over those who preferred the AL’s and other left leaning parties secular orientation. It is interesting to see how at each election this choice of identity has alternated amongst voters.

3.2 The 1996 Elections

Soon after the 1991 elections the opposition started accusing the governing party of nepotism and corruption. Thus, started the ongoing struggle for control and the animosity between the AL and the BNP, which peaked in 1994 when one of the AL candidates got killed just before a by-election and the BNP candidate won. The AL started demanding that all future elections be held under a Neutral Caretaker Government, which the BNP refused on grounds of unconstitutionality. In December 1994 all opposition MPs

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26 Bangladesh Election Commission
resigned from parliament and an extended period of confrontational politics started consisting of nationwide strikes, mass rallies and street agitation\textsuperscript{28}. The BNP government succumbed and set new elections for February 15 1996. The opposition groups however boycotted the election with demands of a Neutral Caretaker Government and the BNP came back to power through an election without participation with a fraction of the electorate having voted.

However, this election was not accepted either by the political parties, civil society or the international community and large-scale agitation started once again. The thriving NGOs of Bangladesh, under the umbrella of Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), which at the time acted as a national coordinating body for all the NGOs, convoked the largest citizens rally held during the two years of agitation against the BNP and obviously sided themselves with the social forces and groups allied against the BNP. The BNP leader finally resigned on 30 March 1996 and a caretaker government was entrusted with the task of overseeing new elections. Thus, according to Zafrullah and Rahman ‘through the very historic process of its evolution, civil society in this country has come to represent the people, and has acted, to a large extent, as the sentinel of freedom and rights’\textsuperscript{29}. The


NGOs then had to decide what role to play in the upcoming elections and again under the umbrella of ADAB decided to support the AL in their effort to mobilize electoral turn out and in influencing the direction in which their members would vote. Their decisions had the following results:

- 74 percent of the electorate turned up for voting with a significant rise in the number of women voters

- National and international observer teams applauded the role of NGOs in encouraging voter turnout and promoting fair elections

- The AL came to power with a strong majority and many claimed that the NGOs had openly supported AL

- Jamaat lost significant number of seats to the AL. Part of the NGO campaign had been to identify ‘fundamentalism’ as a negative political force.

However, the election results have also been explained as not a move of the voters away from Islamic association, rather an ‘unholy alliance… between the secular Awami League and the Islamist Jamaat against the then- ruling BNP government. JI fell apart with BNP and decided to go it alone in 1996, in effect fighting BNP tooth and nail. This also gave AL an edge.

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Khan argues that during the early nineties the AL’s secular claims became much more muted, perhaps as an answer to the 1991 electoral results. Khan goes on to say that ‘by this stage it had become difficult to identify any important issues of concrete political practice affecting secularism on which the...major parties actually differed’\textsuperscript{32}. Thus, conflicting nationalist ideologies had simply become a pawn in the game of electoral gains.

### 3.3 The 2001 Election

In 1999, two years before the next General election, the BNP, JP, JI and Islamic Oikya entered into an alliance against the ruling AL. Sheikh Hasina, the then Prime Minister, claimed that the opposition alliance was a grouping of ‘anti-liberation forces’ and that ‘they wanted to subvert peace and turn Bangladesh back into the old Pakistani province of East Pakistan’\textsuperscript{33}. Schaffer writes that the AL and the BNP engaged in the mud slinging typical of Bangladeshi political campaigns:

“The AL alleged that a victory by the BNP and its Islamic-party partners would lead to the Talibanization of Bangladesh. It asserted that little


difference existed between the orthodox Muslim organizations among its opponents and the rulers of Afghanistan, and forecast that the BNP’s junior partners would enjoy a disproportionately powerful role in a Zia-led government. The BNP, for its part, played the anti-Indian card—a tactic it had used in previous elections. It claimed that Hasina’s government had sold out Bangladesh’s interests to New Delhi….The liberation struggle against Pakistan, the assassination of Hasina’s father, and other events in the early years of independent Bangladesh also figured prominently. Conflicting interpretations of the country’s history and purpose have always been important in Bangladeshi politics, especially at election time.\(^{34}\)

In 2001, voter turn out was once again at 75 percent and both foreign and domestic observers called the elections fundamentally free and fair and as in previous elections, it was predicted that there would be a close contest between the two major parties. However, the election resulted in the BNP gaining 191 out of a total of 300 elected seats. Its allies, two Islamic parties and a dissident faction of the JP, won another 24, giving the victorious coalition an unprecedented majority. The AL won 62 seats, a much lower number than the 146 it had won in 1996. Thus, Bangladeshis once again chose the ‘Islamic’ forces over the ‘Secular’ ones.

3.4 The 2008 Elections

The ninth parliamentary elections were originally scheduled to be held on 22nd January 2007, but were held nearly two years later on 29th December 2008. In October 2006 the BNP led four party alliance government completed its five years in office but the major political parties were unable to come to an agreement on who would be the Chief Advisor of the Neutral Caretaker Government\(^35\) and other issues which eventually led to violent conflicts. This finally led to the military intervening and the declaration of a state of emergency on 11th January 2007, which lasted for two years. The polls held on 29\(^{th}\) December 2008 were termed ‘fair’ and ‘credible’ by observers. The State of Emergency was lifted only 12 days prior to poll day and campaigning was conducted more peacefully than has been the trend in Bangladesh\(^36\).

When campaigning for the ninth parliamentary elections in 2008, the AL in its manifesto promised that the use of religion and communalism in politics would be banned if elected, with courtesy and tolerance restored to the


political culture of the country. On the other hand, the BNP’s alliance partner, JI, stated that if elected it would enact a ‘blasphemy law’ to prevent anti-religious statements and criticism of religion in books, newspapers and electronic media. Jamaat also emphasized giving military training to citizens aged between 20 and 30 under the supervision of the defense forces without clarifying the reason behind such training. During its term in power prior to the 2008 election, the BNP cabinet had a number of JI leaders in it, who are known in Bangladesh as war criminals and are alleged to have committed heinous crimes during the 1971 Liberation War. The rise of the JI, which had been banned in the 1972 Constitution did not sit well with most people in the country and BNPs alliance with Jamaat made the ‘pro-liberation’, secular, Bengali nationalism as espoused by Sheikh Mujib and now the AL more palatable.

The AL won a landslide victory and captured 262 seats out of the 300 parliamentary seats in an unprecedented result in the recent electoral history of the country. 87.5% of the total parliamentary seats were taken by the 14 party grand alliance and the BNP-led alliance won only 32 seats (10.7%).

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The AL won the maximum number of seats by securing 230 seats, a much higher number than necessary to form a single-party government. The 2008 elections have resulted in women and minorities constituting more than 10% of the total members in parliament, a first for Bangladesh. The BNP also lost out in the share of the total number of votes, which became 32.4% in 2008 from 42.3% in 2001. Thus, once again Bangladeshi voters seemed to have chosen ‘the spirit of 1971’ as propagated by the AL over ‘Islamic’ ideologies.

3.5 The 2013 City Corporation Polls

However, despite the overwhelming support given to the AL’s secular stance in 2008, it seems that ‘Islam’ is once again on the rise as a campaign strategy and a garner for support in Bangladesh. Following the demands in Shahbag for a secular Bangladesh and a ban on religion based politics, a group called the Hefazote-i Islam, declared their 13 point demand in April 2013, which include the demand for a Sharia state, the banning of Bangladesh’s pro-women development policy, a ban on mixing of women and men in public and an anti-blasphemy law and exemplary punishment of ‘atheist’ bloggers who ‘insult Islam’. The group lay siege on the capital on May 6th 2013 because the government had not met their demands. Hefazote

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supporters were dispersed by the government through a subvert operation conducted in the middle of the night amidst claims of extrajudicial killings⁴¹.

The BNP seized on the sentiments and fear that were given rise to as a result of Hefazote’s claims and gave its support to Hafazote. The BNP has since then strongly aligned itself with Islamic forces and declared itself the protector of Islam. Khaleda Zia claimed during a speech that the AL were protectors of atheists⁴². On the other hand, Shiekh Hasina took the decision to disband Hafazote’s siege on Dhaka and had obviously sided with the Shahbagh protestors and declared themselves the protectors of minorities and secularism.

The 2013 City Corporation polls in Rajshahi, Sylhet, Khulna and Barisal saw candidates backed by the BNP win overwhelming support⁴³. Many believe that this is once again a sign of the Bangladeshi population choosing Islamic forces over secular ones.

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So what does it mean for Bangladeshi people when they change their allegiance from ‘secularism’ to ‘Islam’ or from ‘Bengali’ to Bangladeshi? What are the differences in policy of the two political parties, which adhere to different notions of nationhood in Bangladesh? Are the ideologies that voters affiliate themselves with realized when the BNP or the AL are voted in to power? In the next section I question the policy implications of ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ and conclude that in fact there is little practical implication for political parties and their policies as far as these ideologies go, and they are simply a tool to mobilize electoral support in Bangladesh, and therefore the instrumentalist claim about nationalism and ideology stands true in Bangladesh today.

4. Competing Nationalisms and the Politics of Rhetoric

As is evident from the above, the conflict between the Bengali nationalism of the AL and the Bangladeshi nationalism of the BNP continues to be used for the purpose of electoral gain. In this final section, I attempt to understand the distinction in the ideologies behind the two nationalisms and their real meaning for Bangladesh today. Bengali nationalism is supposed to be the nationalism of the Bengali people, and Bangladeshi nationalism, the nationalism of the Bangladeshi people. Mushtaq Khan refers to the Bengalis who live in the Indian state of West Bengal, the majority of whom are not Muslim and states that ‘Bengali’ nationalism stresses the shared linguistic
culture of the two Bengals. On the other hand, Bangladeshi nationalism highlights the Muslim culture of East Bengal and points out the specifically Islamic practices that define social life in Bangladesh. So what then are the implications of these two competing ideologies?

If nationalism is seen as a process of border maintenance and creation, then the two nationalisms currently in competition in Bangladesh actually have no difference in their meaning. Both the ‘Bengali’ nationalism of the AL and the ‘Bangladeshi’ nationalism of the BNP agree on the boundaries of the nation state. Although ‘Bengali’ nationalism highlights the shared culture and language of Bengalis as a whole, those who support Bengali nationalism and the AL in Bangladesh are not considering forming or joining a nation-state with West Bengal. On the other hand, the BNP’s ‘Bangladeshi’ nationalism in no way propagates joining back with Pakistan based on the shared Islamic values. Thus, according to Khan:

‘…in terms of the implications for sovereignty or the boundaries of the state, the nationalist debate in Bangladesh is of no consequence. It is as if Chinese nationalists in Taiwan ruled out unification with China but yet wanted to distinguish themselves from Taiwanese nationalists.’

Thus, despite the strong sentiments regarding their identity, the two competing ideologies of nationalism in Bangladesh do not have political consequences for sovereignty.

The only way in which these two nationalisms with no consequence for sovereignty, might have any factual repercussion, is the degree to which secularism is observed in Bangladesh. In 2000, Khan had reasoned that the way in which both the BNP and the AL had dealt with the politics of religion was so similar that it could not be argued that the ideology presented by either had an impact on the practice of secularism. In 2013, the level of commitment to Islam seems to have real difference between the two political parties. However, a closer analysis of recent developments shows the rhetorical nature of these differences and the instrumentalist nature of nationalism in Bangladesh.

Until the 4\textsuperscript{th} of February 2013, the analysis of the upcoming elections would have been that the AL and BNP each had a support base of about 40%, with Jatiyo Party commanding enough votes that could upset calculations. The BNP was in formal alliance with Jamaat, but Jamaat had become more of a liability than an asset. Geographic pockets of support guaranteed the AL and BNP about 60 seats each and winning the election was about the swing constituencies. Amongst the swing constituencies, the urban ones
would have tended to support the BNP because of recent national issues and failures of the government such as the Padma Bridge, Yunus, Grameen Bank, Hallmark and Destiny scandals. Rural constituencies on the other hand would lend their support to the AL because of farmer friendly policies, which kept prices steady despite growth in production and because of the efficient way in which natural disasters had been tackled\(^\text{45}\). The issue of Islam v secularism was little more than political rhetoric. Then came Shahbag, and the question to ask is whether Shahbag changed the level of commitment to ‘Islam’ or ‘secularism’ for the two major political parties?

Within days of the formation of the Shahbag movement, the AL grabbed their opportunity and showed support to the demonstrators, going as far as providing free Wi-Fi, meals and 24 hour police protection. By siding with Shahbag and the spirit of 1971, AL believed it’s identity as the upholders of secularism and it’s Bengali nationalism would make the urban constituencies forget about the failures of the past four years and support them for bringing the war criminals to justice and for their progressive stance.

During the initial period of the Shahbag movement, the BNP was at a complete loss and said nothing. However, JI, it’s ally, needed to stop it’s leaders from being tried for crimes and attacked the Shahbag protestors as

\(^{45}\) [http://alalodulal.org/2013/04/06/female-voters-the-missing-variable/]
atheists and started large scale agitation and violence through hartals, and even went so far as to print posters of the moon with it’s Emir, Sayeedee’s, face on it, to convince the population that JI and it’s leaders had ‘God’s approval’. By early March, the BNP leadership also realized that it’s greatest electoral advantage lay with the ‘Islam in danger’ cry. In the rural areas, where AL had more support, it’s image as the protector of Islam could only help the BNP.

Unfortunately, not to be left behind, the AL government swiftly started arresting bloggers accusing them of writing anti-islamic sentiment, and thereby trying to disassociate from its previous secular stance and also play ‘the protector of Islam’ card. Despite defining Bangladeshi nationalism on the basis of secularism and religion, the only area in which the BNP and the AL may be approaching religion differently is in meeting the Hafazote i-Islam’s demand for a Blasphemy Law providing for the death sentence for those hurting Islamic sentiments. The AL has clearly stated that it will not enact any such law. While the BNP has not made an official statement on the issue, it is unlikely that they would enact such a law if they come to power.

Another area where the AL has shown that perhaps their commitment to ‘secularism’ is more muted than their ‘Bengali’ ideology would imply is with
the Fifteenth Amendment. On 29th July 2010 the Supreme Court Appellate Division upheld the High Court’s historic verdict of 29th August 2005 that had declared the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution (1979) illegal and therefore restored the ban on the formation of political organizations based on religion. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution had ratified all actions of the martial law regime of Ziaur Rahman including those that destroyed the basic structure of the Constitution by removing secularism, allowing politics based on religion, and allowing anti-liberation forces to enter mainstream politics. According to the 2005 High Court verdict, the Fifth Amendment undermined the very sovereign character of the republic.

As a result of the judgment, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted. Many claim that this was a mess because it retained Islam as the state religion but at the same time restored secularism into the constitution. After the Fifteenth Amendment, Article 2A read that 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. Many have questioned whether it is necessary to retain a state religion in the constitution at all? The AL majority parliament obviously drafted the amendment to read this way in order to placate the Muslim majority in the country and thereby not damage their vote bank. So again
there seems to be very little difference in actual implication to secularism between the BNP and the AL.

After the Fifth Amendment judgment, the Bangladesh Law Minister at the time, Shafique Ahmed, stated that as per the verdict ‘political parties and other organizations using religion as their guidelines stand banned with the annulment of the Fifth Amendment’\textsuperscript{46}. On 1\textsuperscript{st} August 2013 the High Court declared Jamaat’s registration with the EC illegal. However following these judgments, the AL government has shown reluctance to follow through as politically it would mean chaos in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina has reportedly stated at a cabinet meeting that her government had no intention of actually banning religion-based political parties, given the political upheaval that it would cause in Muslim majority Bangladesh\textsuperscript{47}. And on 4\textsuperscript{th} August 2013, following the high courts verdict declaring the registration of Jamaat with the EC illegal, the Local Government and Rural Development Minister has said that the government has no plans to ban Jamaat\textsuperscript{48}.

\textsuperscript{46} Hashmi, Arshi Saleem, ‘Banglaesh Ban on Religion Based Politics: Reviving the Secular Character of the Constitution’, Spotlight on Regional Affairs, Institute of Regional Studies, February 2011, Page 2.

\textsuperscript{47} Hashmi, Arshi Saleem, ‘Banglaesh Ban on Religion Based Politics: Reviving the Secular Character of the Constitution’, Spotlight on Regional Affairs, Institute of Regional Studies, February 2011, Page 7.

Another area where the AL have tried to uphold the secular character of the constitution but then failed to carry through is with women’s inheritance laws. In Bangladesh, personal law governs the areas of marriage, divorce, alimony and property inheritance. The sharia inheritance laws mean that a daughter receives only half of what her brother inherits and a widow receives one-eighth of her husband’s property if they have children and one-fourth if they do not. In its 2008 Election Manifesto the AL had vowed to rectify discriminatory laws that are against the interest of women. However, no such rectification has materialized despite the AL’s super majority in parliament. Various plans to change the inheritance laws have been met with violent protest by the Islamic right. It appears that even the AL government cannot afford to enforce the constitution in this matter⁴⁹ (the constitution calls for women to be recognized as having equal rights in every sphere of life).

The BNP on the other hand does not even bother to make women’s inheritance rights a part of their agenda. Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kori is quoted to have said, ‘Politicians are afraid to touch religion because they are afraid of losing votes’⁵⁰. In fact, the Hefazat-e-Islam first mobilized as a

response to a plan for legislation, which would ensure that all children inherit equal portions of an estate.

Thus, despite very little difference in their policy and actions towards Islam and secularism or towards an union with West Bengal or Pakistan, the main rhetoric used by the major political parties continue to be based on religious and secular ideologies. Thus perhaps, even in 2013, Khan’s analysis remains correct and as Tazeen Murshid writes ‘collective and national identities are fluid, plastic and malleable’. In Bangladesh, national identity has been derived from ‘social and political interaction... Elites in competition for political power and economic advantage have constructed and given form and content to national group identity. While the ruling elite has played a decisive role in ensuring state patronage for the promotion of its particular world view, counter Elites have risen to challenge its hegemony’.

5. Conclusion

Ernest Gellner writes that nationalism has become the key principle of political legitimacy in the modern world. For him, culture now replaces social structure. While, once social structure was ‘tightly circumscribed,}

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nested and ascriptive\textsuperscript{53} therefore not requiring shared linguistic or cultural communication to preserve social order, in modern times, social roles are open and changeable and therefore require people to have some common marker which they can rely on to hold them together:

‘Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist – but it does need some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on, even if … these are purely negative\textsuperscript{54}.

In this paper, I have shown that nationalism was propagated in Bangladesh on the basis of an ethno-symbolic discourse prior to it’s independence from Pakistan by focusing on an identity based on ethnicity, language and secularism, as opposed to nationalism based on the two-nation theory and Islam which had led to the creation of Pakistan. Soon after independence, and with the death of Sheikh Mujib, Ziaur Rahman ensured his place in Bangladeshi politics by constructing a new version of Bangladeshi nationalism, by going back to the basis of the two-nation theory and shared identity on the basis of religion. Today, Bangladeshi political parties are still relying on these two competing versions of nationalism in order to maintain their legitimacy, mobilize and win elections. This has resulted in the country


being divided in its belief of what is the basis of its nationhood and shared identity – is it language, ethnicity and secularism or is it religion and territoriality?

According to Haas, ‘successful nationalism also implies a minimum of social harmony, an acceptance of the values that the symbols communicate sufficient to maintain social peace and peaceful social change’55. Today, Bangladesh suffers from increasing use of political violence and ‘muscle politics’, confrontational politics of the street and the disruption of everyday life through hartals, carried out for the defense of one or the other propagated nationalism. Thus, unlike Haas’ requirement, nationalism in Bangladesh has been unsuccessful in creating social harmony because political parties disagree on the shared values of the society and conflict and competition continues to be triggered based on the conflicting versions of nationalism. Until the political elite in Bangladesh can come to a consensus about the basis of nationhood in Bangladesh and move competition to genuine policy platforms, the society will continue to be divided along ideological lines resulting in frequent disruptions to daily life.

55 Haas, Ernst B., ‘What is Nationalism and Why should we Study it?’, International Organization, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Summer 1986), Page 709.