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# Playing with Fire: Islamism and Politics in Bangladesh

Martin Griffiths and Mubashar Hasan

*This article examines Bangladesh in the context of the debate over the conditions under which Islamist groups are likely to subvert democracy or to be transformed by the democratic process. Bangladesh signals two conditions that play an important role. The first is the role of governments in promoting religion as a source of national identity. Successive governments in Bangladesh have consistently moved away from the promise of secularism that underpinned the creation of the country. The danger of establishing political legitimacy on the basis of religion is the absence of any authoritative interpretation of what religion requires in terms of public policy and how it can coexist with basic liberal freedoms and human rights. The second condition is the role of the government in providing and adequately regulating basic public goods such as education.*

*Keywords: Bangladesh; Islam; Islamism*

## Introduction

In this article we examine Bangladesh as a pertinent case study in the broader context of the ongoing debate over the conditions under which Islamist groups are likely to subvert democracy or be transformed by the democratic process to become post-Islamist organizations (the so-called 'inclusion-moderation' thesis). Whilst these conditions are likely to vary from country to country, Bangladesh alerts us to two conditions that play an important role in shaping the process. The first is the role of the government itself in promoting religion as a source of national identity. As we will show, successive governments in Bangladesh, whether military or civilian, have consistently

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moved away from the promise of secularism that underpinned the creation of Bangladesh in the early 1970s. The danger of establishing political legitimacy on the basis of religion, of course, is the absence of any authoritative interpretation of what religion requires in terms of public policy and how it can coexist with basic liberal freedoms and human rights (Rudd Owen, 2001). At the time of writing, this issue is literally being fought over as the government confronts a growing Islamic movement in Bangladesh, led by Shah Ahmad Shafi, called *Hefazat-e-Islam*. This is not a political party, but a broad organization that was established in 2010 precisely to oppose government plans to give women the same rights of inheritance as men. The second condition that needs to be examined in this debate is the role of the government in providing and regulating, or failing to provide and regulate, adequate basic public goods such as education. Hefazat enjoys the support of millions of believers thanks to the control it exerts over private Qur'anic schools in Bangladesh (Mishra, 2012). Unless the government provides more of its people with basic education, or exercises effective regulation over non-governmental organizations, Islamist groups will step in. Indeed, in Bangladesh they already have. The danger, then, is not so much the takeover of the government by Islamist parties, but death by suicide, as successive governments succumb to the demands of radical Islamism rather than attempt to tackle the source of its support.

### **Islam, Islamism, Post-Islamism**

After 9/11, the United States' proclamation of a war on terrorism generated an intense debate over the character of the enemy. Since terrorism is a method rather than an agent, some influential conservative commentators who believed that the United States and its allies were indeed at war invoked Samuel Huntington and identified Islam itself as the underlying culprit (Kramer, 1993). Widespread criticism of this particular narrative did not eradicate it, however. Instead, many of the allegations routinely made against Islam in general were more finely targeted toward jihadi *Islamism*, an allegedly modern political ideology rather than an ancient religion. The underlying motif of this narrative is the apparent resistance of Islamism to change, and the danger this resistance allegedly poses to democracy in Muslim societies (Langhor, 2001). In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the phenomenon of 'post-Islamism', and the ways in which democratic pressures are generating new Islamic parties across parts of the Muslim world (see Martin and Barzegar, 2010).

In his original framing of the debate, Huntington (1996) was concerned with the fate of Western civilization, which he saw as threatened by the rise of aggressive external rivals and by internal multiculturalists who were trying to dilute the shared culture that has been the West's strength in the past. Huntington's thesis attracted a huge critical literature. One frequent charge was that of cultural reductionism. By placing so much stress on the role of culture, Huntington ignored or underestimated the importance of other factors in shaping politics and identity, such as economics, state interests and universal values. As Parekh (2008: 19) puts it, 'cultural identity matters to people, but so do other things such as decent existence, justice, self-respect and the

respect of others'. Second, Huntington's focus on civilizations was the target of a welter of criticism, including attacks on his definition of civilization and consequently on his classification of particular civilizations. Huntington defined civilization primarily along religious lines, but that is open to objection from a number of directions. Perhaps the most general point to make in this connection is Amartya Sen's insistence that people's identities always have multiple dimensions, so that 'while religious categories have received much airing in recent years, they cannot be presumed to obliterate other distinctions, and even less can they be seen as the only relevant system of classifying people across the globe' (Sen, 2006: 10–11). To take just one example, the West is not readily identifiable with a religion, since the main contender, Christianity, is an object of indifference or even revulsion to many Westerners. Further, Huntington fell into the classic culturalist trap of presenting his civilizations as bounded monoliths. The values that Huntington identified as distinctively Western—toleration, personal liberty and democracy—have long been respected, in varying degrees, in many different societies, not just those of the West (Ayooob, 2008).

Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis emphasized the potential for conflict between the West and two challenger civilizations, the Islamic and the Chinese. In each instance cultural differences are said to be profound, essential and therefore permanent. In the case of Islam the most fundamental difference, according to Huntington, was that Islam rejects the division between state and religion that is the bedrock of the personal rights and liberties characteristic of the West. The view that Islam is essentially anti-liberal was developed more fully by Roger Scruton in *The West and the Rest* (2002), but Bernard Lewis (2004) and Daniel Pipes (2003) also shared the argument.

In recent years, however, the debate has moved on from the conservative critique of Islam as an ancient religion to focus on Islamism as a modern political ideology. According to its critics, Islamism is a 'contemporary movement that conceives Islam as a political ideology' (Roy, 1994: ix)—and thus the people who subscribe to this ideology are Islamists. Almost universally, the ultimate objective of Islamist groups is to establish an Islamic state, which is 'a moral society on the basis of God's *shari'a* (divine law) for the service of the oneness of God [*tawhid*]' (Moussalli, 1999: 19). Opinions on the optimal geographic boundaries of the Islamic state—whether within the traditional nation-state or in the form of a transnational entity—vary from group to group. Regardless of these details, Islamist groups are devoted to action.

While the antecedents of modern-day Islamism can be traced to the emergence of various Muslim reform movements and reformers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Islamism is generally recognized as ascending onto the mainstream political scene in the 1970s (Gerges, 2009). This period includes the 1973 oil crisis and the decline of the ideology of Arab nationalism following the Six Day War in 1967. It also happens to coincide with the beginning of what Samuel Huntington (1991) called the 'third wave' of democracy. The year 1979 is often seen as the point when Islamism became consolidated as a global political force following the

Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the consequent *jihad* of the Afghan *mujahedeen*.

For Paul Berman (2003) and other commentators (Tibi, 2012), Islamism is an expression of modern totalitarianism, and constitutes a rebellion against liberal civilization. In contrast to those who focus on Islam as a religion, the most stringent critics of Islamism see it as a thoroughly modern and recognizable ideology fuelled by an underlying mythology of good versus evil (Bendle, 2006). Like its predecessors—Stalinism, fascism and communism—Islamism has caused waves of violence across the Muslim world. It is a pathological mass movement, which cannot be negotiated with (Bennett and Leibsohn, 2011). Moreover, it is anti-democratic not only in its methods, but in its ultimate goal—an Islamic state where there is no separation of religion and politics. In his latest work, Berman (2011) points to the widespread use of violence by Islamists in Somalia, Sudan, Egypt and Algeria to impose their will against minority groups. Ironically, Islamists appear to share Huntington's worldview that there can be no reconciliation between Islam and the West. As Berman (2003: 42) puts it, 'they gaze across the landscape of liberal civilization, across the many achievements of democratic freedom, social justice, and scientific rationality. And everywhere they [see] a gigantic lie. Liberal civilization seems to them a horror. Liberal civilization [is] exploitation and murder, a civilization that ought to be destroyed as quickly and violently as possible'.

If correct, the critique of Islamism mounted by Berman and others has several consequences. First, it should warn liberals to be wary of apologists for political Islam, particularly in the West itself. This is the basis for Berman's critique of Tariq Ramadan and his alleged sympathizers in the West (Berman, 2011). The war on terrorism is a war of ideas as well as arms, and there can only be one winner. Second, the rise of democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world is not a cause for celebration, but concern. To the extent that Islamist groups moderate their ideological fanaticism in order to win votes, this is merely expedient. 'Islamists themselves regard liberal democracy with contempt. They are willing to accommodate it as an avenue to power but as an avenue that runs only one way' (Bukay, 2007: 77). The logical conclusion is the necessity for a secular dictatorship to modernize Muslim societies before allowing them access to democracy. Secularization would be a preliminary condition to the introduction of democracy. Those who share these arguments can point to the consequences of political Islam when it gains power either by force of arms or through the ballot box: the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979; the military coup in Sudan in 1989; the success of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front in the 1991 elections; the conquest of much of Afghan territory by the Taliban in 1996 leading to the establishment of its Islamic emirate; and the success in 2006 of Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections. The Hamas win was not recognized, nor was the national unity government formed. Instead, a siege was imposed on Gaza to suffocate the movement.

Given this history, and however unpalatable it seems, it may well be more desirable to support the princes of the Saudi royal family on the throne, even the ones who maintain contact with al-Qaeda, than to see Islamist parties, such as those that exist

in Pakistan, take control of the Saudi Kingdom. It is hard not to be reminded of a similar concern during the Cold War in American foreign policy, when communism occupied the space now filled with Islamists. Indeed, writing in the 1950s, Bernard Lewis (1958: 318) made an explicit association between Islam and communism, describing the former as 'an almost unrelieved autocracy'. For those who see proof of the incompatibility between Islam and democracy in the electoral success of political Islam, it would be important to remember that the first universal suffrage in Europe and in other countries was hardly favourable to democracy. The first elections that followed the revolution of 1848 in France brought a reactionary majority to power that buried the Second Republic and plunged the country of the 'rights of man and of the citizen' into a reign of terror. Likewise, it was through elections that Hitler and Mussolini arrived in power, only to drag Europe and the world into one of the darkest episodes of human history.

How helpful is this concern over the electoral gains of political Islam? Are we really faced with a choice between an allegedly secular authoritarianism and Islamic fundamentalism? For some observers, there are grounds for suspecting that the concern is exaggerated, and the choice unnecessary. The evidence needs to be examined carefully by scholars and (perhaps more importantly) policymakers, since flawed assumptions and ungrounded fears can be exploited by despotic regimes to maintain their autocratic rule.

The term 'post-Islamism' is increasingly being used to describe a complex phenomenon in Muslim societies across the Middle East and elsewhere. In his original definition of the term, Asef Bayat (2007) argues that it refers to a condition as well as a project. Post-Islamism is not an extension of Islamism, but a break from it. It is something qualitatively different from Islamism. As a condition, post-Islamism emerges 'after a phase [of experimentation], during which the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters. [Eventually], pragmatic attempts to maintain the system [require] abandoning certain of its underlying principles' (Bayat, 2007: 19). As a project, post-Islamism is

A conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political and intellectual domains. Yet, post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular. Rather it represents an endeavour to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn the underlying principle of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. (Bayat, 2007: 19)

In their examination of the development of post-Islamism in Egypt, Indonesia and Turkey, Anthony Bubalo, Greg Fealy and Whit Mason (2008) measure it across six variables. These include a shift of emphasis from the goal of establishing a *Shari'a* enforcing state to the promotion of *Shari'a* values; an increasing focus on good governance rather than Islamic governance; a growing concentration on the moral appeal of Islamic candidates rather than the purity of their message; a growing diversity of membership within Islamist parties and movements; an increase in toleration of

those who dissent; and finally, an increasing policy oscillation as different factions vie for control in shaping the agenda in a democratic context. In short, it is becoming increasingly problematic to identify a coherent and common project for all the groups of the movement. What is clear is that al-Qaeda and its affiliates do not represent the dominant trajectory of Islamism across the Middle East, which may be one reason for their resurgent manifestation in parts of some African states such as Somalia, Mali and Nigeria, as well as Libya.

Even if it is too soon to talk of an end to political Islam, either by a conversion to democracy of the groups which represent it, or by the arrival of an alternative secular democracy which has trouble in asserting itself, the total triumph of these groups does not constitute a fatal destiny from which the Muslim world will not be able to escape (see An-Na'im, 2008). In many Muslim societies, post-Islamist parties are allegedly undergoing a process of adaptation to the requirements of a globalized and highly interconnected liberal market economy (Soguk, 2011). In parts of the Middle East, the gradual emergence of democracy and political professionalism has inevitably involved the secularization of political action. As Michael Driessen (2012: 175) notes,

the need for practical results combined with a demanding press makes it much more difficult for Islamists to defend a simplistic 'Islam is the Solution' platform, creating incentives instead to consider adopting other, less religiously exclusive but politically successful, policy positions.

### **Bringing Governments back in: Bangladesh**

The debate over the relationship between Islamism and democracy is limited, however, insofar as it ignores the role of governments in shaping that relationship by strengthening or weakening secular values and institutions. Bangladesh is an excellent example of the malign consequences of political opportunism by weak governments.

Until 1971, Bangladesh was part of Pakistan and used to be known as East Pakistan. In the South Asian context, it should be noted that Bangladesh did not undergo any long-term movement for its independence. Although the nationalist movement for cultural autonomy began in 1952 after the Pakistani leadership declared Urdu (spoken by only 5 per cent of the population of East Pakistan) as the state language in the Bengali-speaking half (which formed 60 per cent of the population), it did not evolve into a full-scale struggle for independence until 1971 (see Uddin, 2006). That struggle was relatively short, and very violent. In March 1971, after Bengali nationalists in East Pakistan's Awami League (AL) won an overall majority in the proposed national assembly and made modest appeals for autonomy, Pakistani troops killed between 1 million and 2 million Bengalis and raped some 200,000 girls and women (Power, 2003: 82). Soon after the independence of the new state in December 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (the leader of the ruling Awami League) banned all communal politics in the country and adopted nationalism, democracy, secularism ('dhormo niropechota' in Bengali) and socialism as the four constitutional 'pillars' of Bangladesh (Murshid, 1997).



These steps were taken in part to weaken what is today the third largest party in the country, Bangladesh *Jamaat e Islami* (BJI). The BJI did not support partition from Muslim Pakistan. Indeed, its opponents argue that it helped the Pakistani military to kill Bangladeshi freedom fighters and intellectuals, and incited the Pakistani military to commit further war crimes, including rape. Today, the BJI is a highly organized cadre-style party built upon the *Shari'a*-based ideology designed by Mawlana Maududi, founder of the *Jamaat* movement in South Asia before the partition of India and Pakistan. According to Maududi, Islam and the state are identical. Allah is a political as well as religious leader. In terms of its organization, the BJI is a Leninist party, inducting cadres through a rigorous procedure laid down in the party manual. An individual can only be accepted as a full member or *Rukan* once they have passed through rigorous tests of personal discipline, supervised by a senior party member (Pattanaik, 2009: 276).

It must be acknowledged that from its inception Bangladesh faced a genuine dilemma in determining the relative priority to be given to language and religion in shaping its national identity, with obvious consequences for minority groups (see Rashiduzzaman, 1994). The very foundation of the Bangladeshi nation-state is anchored in an internal contradiction. If Bangladeshis assert their 'Bengaliness' over their religious identification (Bangladesh is now 90 per cent Muslim), then it is not clear what distinguishes them from the Bengalis of West Bengal in India, thus raising the spectre of irredentism (Bhaumik, 2009). Alternatively, the basis for a separate nation state for Bangladeshi Bengalis appeals to Islam as the key to national identity. The vast majority of Bangladeshis are Muslims, in contrast to the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal. Many Bangladeshis speak in a de-Sanskritized Bengali language and use more Arabic and Persian words. In emphasizing their religion as a basis for national identity, Bangladeshi Muslims are also expressing a deep-rooted concern over the prospect of caste Hindu domination, which has a long history in Bengal—and this fear informs discussions in Bangladesh (Kabir, 1987). That concern led to widespread dissatisfaction with the Awami League in the early 1970s. Gratitude towards India for its assistance in the war of independence was soon replaced with a sullen resentment towards its more powerful neighbour (Kabir, 2006: 484).

The tension between language and religion has always been a site of struggle in Bangladeshi politics, which manifests itself as a clash between secularism and religion as the basis for state legitimacy (see Kabir, 2006; Rashiduzzaman, 1994). For cultural nationalists, language/culture is the more important determinant of identity, and they seek a pan-ethnic Bengali identity with Bengalis living in West Bengal (India). For religious nationalists, Bangladeshi Muslims must reject residual aspects of folk Islam and strictly follow the Saudi Arabian interpretation of Islam and its codes. It is this group that has gained power in recent years because of state patronage. A country that was inaugurated on the basis of ethno-linguistic nationalism (a nation of Bengali-speaking people) very soon shifted toward a religiously inflected nationalism—that is, a new nationalism known as Bangladeshi nationalism (Khan, 1985).

Mujib's original vision of secularism and socialism for Bangladesh was under pressure as soon as the government confronted serious economic problems and accusations of widespread nepotism and patrimonial politics. It is worth remembering that during the 1960s the nationalist movement was led by people who were preoccupied with questions of cultural and linguistic autonomy. They never seriously addressed questions of national development such as economic growth, land reform or universal education, and lacked the will to move the country from poverty toward a path of development. The 1972 Constitution extolled the virtues of secularism, which meant the neutrality of the state toward all religions. What was less clear though was the extent to which secularism was embraced by the population of Bangladesh (Akhter, 2012). The vast majority of Bangladeshi Muslims consider themselves as pious and God-fearing Muslims. Secularism as a value was not based on a consensus of the population but was imposed from above by the ruling party, the Awami League, whose constituency was urban and middle-class (Ahamed and Nazneen, 1990). Secularism was a political tool wielded to ban the Islamic political parties (the Muslim League and *Jamaat e Islami*) in the country. While the Bangladeshi peasants fought for the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistani military domination, they were not part of the nation-making project. The language/culture debates of Bangladeshi cultural nationalists had no relevance to their lives (Riaz, 2004).

Following independence in 1971, radical leftists soon engaged in violent resistance against the government. Mujibism also weakened support from oil-producing Middle Eastern countries while the United States kept its distance from Bangladesh and its socialist rhetoric, which had allowed the regime to maintain close ties with the USSR and India. Indeed, Mujib's rhetorical promotion of secularism was itself in part an attempt to maintain friendly ties to India, whose considerable support for Bangladesh during the war with Pakistan through military, diplomatic and humanitarian means was underpinned by its own interest in separating Bangladesh from Pakistan (Riaz and Bastian, 2011). Instead of having a strong enemy on two sides of the country, the creation of Bangladesh left a weaker enemy on one side and a dependent friend on the other (Khan, 2011).

Once in power, Mujib also realized the economic importance of Middle Eastern countries and so he began to promote an Islamic component to nationalism in Bangladesh (Rahim, 2007). Thus he participated in the meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) held in Pakistan in 1974 (with Yasser Arafat, Colonel Gaddafi and other Muslim leaders) even though his regime was avowedly secular. Mujib even sent a group of Bangladeshi doctors to assist his Arab 'allies' during the Yom Kippur war in 1973 against Israel. In short, the process of promoting religion as a basis for national identity had already begun with the Awami League before the military coup of 1975. It was to accelerate during military rule over the next 15 years (see Alam, 1993).

Religious nationalism was introduced in 1975 by the first military dictator (Major General Ziaur Rahman) and overlay the older ethno-linguistic nationalism known as Bengali nationalism upon which the country was inaugurated in 1971. At the time of

its inauguration Bangladeshi nationalism was intended to incorporate all Bangladeshi citizens, whether Bengali or not, under one national identity, and to articulate a differentiated Bengali identity that was distinct from the identity of Bengalis living in West Bengal, India. Although the category 'Bangladeshi' was supposed to be a more inclusive category that embraced all citizens, whether Bengali-speaking or not, it effectively narrowed the definition of what it meant to be a Bangladeshi, and introduced an Islamic element into the national consciousness. Furthermore, in order to consolidate his power base, the first military dictator started his own political party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) that took as its founding principle Bangladeshi nationalism, which combined religion and ethnicity. The creation of the BNP also bifurcated electoral politics in Bangladesh along religious lines: BNP supporters are overwhelmingly Muslim, whilst the Awami League includes supporters who are either Hindus or who belong to other religious and ethnic minorities. It is not surprising then that Bangladeshi nationalism soon paved the way for a hyper-Islam-identified nationalism and became a tool in the nation-making project of the military dictators (Khondker, 2010).

The military regimes led by Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981) and his successor General Hussein Muhammad Ershad (1982–1990) systematically promoted Islam in public discourse. The concept of secularism was replaced with one of absolute trust and faith in Allah in the constitution and a state-run Islamic university was established, making Islamic studies a mandatory topic for Muslim children at school. In addition, hundreds of mosques and madrassahs were supported by the state. Islam became a tool to legitimize undemocratic regimes in the eyes of the Muslim majority. Popular attachment to Islam was exploited by military governments that lacked a widely accepted public mandate to run the country. A similar pattern was followed in Pakistan following the military coup of July 1977 (Hakim, 1999).

In Bangladesh, however, the process was fuelled by active collaboration between the military regimes and the BJI, whose own leaders had strong connections with the Middle East (Rahim, 2001: 248). In the aftermath of their defeat in the Yom Kippur war, Middle Eastern countries opposed to the US alliance with Israel not only raised the price of oil but also intensified their promotion of Islamic missionary work in developing Muslim nations, including Bangladesh. The proliferation of Islamic institutions and organizations, mainly of a charitable and missionary character, and the construction of new mosques and madrassahs along with the repair, extension and beautification of old ones were overt manifestations of this effort.

At the same time, foreign relations with both the USSR and India declined as Bangladesh drew closer to the Middle East and, paradoxically, the United States. Bangladesh's relationship with the Soviets reached its nadir in 1983 when 14 Soviet diplomats were accused of involvement in espionage and expelled (Rahman, 1984: 249). After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US actively supported Taliban mujahedeen. The Bangladeshi regime reacted by tolerating militant forms of political Islam, which openly advocated the establishment of *Shari'a* law.

On an institutional level, Islam was made a part of everyday life from the transmission of Muslim prayers on state-run TV and radio stations to the establishment

of various institutions focused on the cultivation of religion, such as the Ministry of Religion, Islamic universities and madrassahs. The Islamic Academy, which was formerly a small institution, was transformed into the Islamic Foundation, the largest umbrella organization of research on Islam in the country. One of the key contributions of the Islamic Foundation to the process of Islamization was the translation of the Quran into Bengali, making the Quran cheaply and readily available to the people (Riaz and Naser, 2011). Today, the Islamic Foundation has offices in all 64 districts of Bangladesh. It has five major objectives: to propagate Islamic values, to promote research highlighting the contribution of Islamic culture, to propagate Islamic concepts of tolerance and justice, to provide grants on Islamic projects, and to promote collaboration with and between organizations and groups whose philosophy aligns with the Foundation (see Hossain, 2006).

Zia also reinstated the *Jamaat e Islami* and several other Islamic political parties that were banned after the independence of Bangladesh and allowed them to again participate in electoral politics. This helped him to appease local Islamic groups in the country, and also to gain legitimacy as a Muslim leader among Muslim countries. In order to consolidate their power base, the two military dictators wooed the Islamic parties, and simultaneously promoted madrassah education alongside the secular education of the state. The military dictators also supported the growth of the private madrassah system known as the Quomi (People's) Madrassah, which only teach the Quran, Hadith, Sunnah and an orthodox interpretation of the *Shari'a* to its students. Its students are taught to recite the Quran in ancient Arabic. It is estimated that the Quomi Madrassahs number around another 15,000 (there is no official number available) and unofficial sources estimate that they have an enrolment of over 2 million plus students. Indeed, today Bangladesh hosts the largest number of registered religious madrassahs of any country in the South Asian subcontinent. The funding sources of Quomi madrassahs are shrouded in secrecy. Although they do not accept any government funds, the Bangladeshi Quomi Madrassahs received patronage from Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Libya in the 1970s to 1990s. They also receive private donations from overseas Bangladeshis, primarily from the United Kingdom and the Middle East (Hossain and Curtis, 2010).

One might also note that during the 1970s, oil companies in the Middle East recruited Bangladeshis as labour to work in the oil fields. For these men, it was their first global contact and exposure to the Islam of Saudi Arabia. Upon their return home, they were keen to reform the 'impure' folk Islamic tradition of rural Bangladesh through their patronage of the Quomi madrassah schools. In addition to this, local patrons also establish and donate money to madrassahs in order to garner votes in local elections. These religious actions are considered acts of piety by villagers, and earn politically ambitious patrons the goodwill and the votes of rural people. Since the 1970s, the Middle East has become increasingly important as a job market for almost 7 million unskilled workers from Bangladesh, most of whom gravitate to Saudi Arabia.

Civilian rule returned to Bangladesh in 1990, following widespread unrest and a rare period of collaboration between the Awami League (now led by Sheikh Hasna,

Mujibur's eldest daughter) and the BNP (led by Ziaur Rahman's widow, Khaleda Zia). Since 1990, the two main parties have contested four elections: in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008. Unfortunately, the tensions between the religious and secular dimensions of Bangladesh have intensified during this period. During the 1996 election campaign each of the main political parties (the AL, BNP and *Jamaat e Islami*) appealed to Islam for votes, and have done so in every subsequent election campaign. Similarly, the number of Islamic parties willing to replace the Bangladeshi secular legal system with *Shari'a* law has allegedly risen to more than 100, even though only eight moderate political parties bearing Islamic names and images are presently registered with the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC). After 9/11, Bangladesh was one of several bases for globally networked Islamists proclaiming a Jihad against the West as well as against democracy in Bangladeshi. These include the banned Jamat-ul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB), responsible for a series of suicide bombings since 2005; Harakatul Jihad-i-Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B), whose leader, Fazlul Rahman, signed an official declaration of war against the United States, alongside Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri; and other groups such as Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB). They share a rejection of the West and of Western values and call for the establishment of *Shari'a* law throughout Bangladesh.

After assuming power in 2008 with overwhelming public support, the present government of Sheikh Hasina has unsuccessfully tried to restore some balance between secularism and religion in the constitution. It has removed the mention of 'absolute trust and faith in Allah' from the constitution, but retained Islam as the state religion. It has banned *Hizb Ut Tahrir Bangladesh* (HTB) on charges of sedition and set up a domestic War Crimes Tribunal to charge the BJI's leader with 1971 war crimes—a move which may be interpreted as an unofficial war against Islamists. In turn, the latter have reacted by attempting to topple the government with support from parts of the armed forces. The failed military coup in 2012 can be seen as an act carried out by a segment of the population who would find refuge in political Islam. Their anger derives from discontent with the two major parties, the AL and the BNP. Since the 1990s, this confrontation has caused much mayhem: political killings are frequent as well as state-sponsored extra-judicial killings of civilians. Strikes and bombings accompany the politicization of the civil bureaucracy and the justice system.

There is an interesting paradox to this story of the explicit role of successive governments in fomenting Islamism in Bangladesh. We have already alluded to the tension between ethnicity and religion in constituting Bangladeshi nationalism. But one must also acknowledge that the invocation of religion for political legitimacy is driven by a cynical opportunism among a ruling elite that cannot deliver real development for the country. In Bangladesh, corruption has reached an alarming level in all segments of society as increasing nepotism through partisan political preferences has resulted in growing frustration among the populace. While globalization has brought economic opportunities to a few, it has also widened income disparities. Eighty per cent of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day. In terms of human development, the United Nations ranks Bangladesh 146th out of 186 listed countries. Transparency

International gives the country almost an identical ranking according to perceptions of corruption among government officials. This bleak situation is fertile ground for the radicalization of frustrated minds in military and educational institutions to which the vision of Islamic justice has some appeal. In doing so, the Islamists can use Bangladesh as another battleground in their war against the West, associated in their eyes with capitalism and rampant inequality.

This conflict waged by various Islamists may be interpreted as a form of resistance against the impact of global capitalism on Bangladesh. Whilst the majority of Bangladeshis believe that the role of Islam in Bangladesh should not be political (in a context marked by a great diversity of Islamic forms, ranging from Wahhabism and Salafism to Sufism), the mainstream political parties have failed to reduce growing discontent with the current state of the economy. Nearly half the population is between 15 and 24 years of age.

Surprisingly, however, Bangladesh has experienced moderately good economic growth over the past decade of around 5 per cent a year despite its high levels of corruption and poor governance. The basic reason is that Bangladesh is a classic case of a coastal low-income country with few resources. Its path to development has therefore been through the export of labour-intensive manufactures (such as the clothing industry) and services. In this context, the government does not have to clean up its performance in order to preside over some economic success. As Paul Collier (2008: 65) notes, 'the government merely has to avoid doing harm rather than actively do much good. Exporters simply need an environment of modest taxation, macroeconomic stability, and a few transport facilities'. These are precisely the priorities that the government shares with the World Bank. On the other hand, whether this strategy is sustainable over the long term is problematic. At present population growth rates, Bangladesh will double its population of 125 million in less than 30 years, and what is good for export-oriented development (low taxes) is hardly conducive to raising basic education levels for the population. In short, Bangladesh provides an ideal context for Islamism to thrive as governments continue to avoid their responsibility to provide sufficient basic public goods (Lowe, 2013: 673).

The rise of Hefazat-e-Islam is a good illustration of the problem. It was formed in 2011 as an organization of the Quomi Madrasa lobby to oppose any moves to give Muslim women equal rights in inheritance or to reform Quomi Madrasa education. However, Hefazat burst into the political scene in 2013 with its 13-point demand, including the promulgation of a blasphemy law with a provision for the death penalty, the scrapping of laws on women's rights and education, declaring members of the Ahmedya community non-Muslims, banning Christian missionary activities (especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts), and dismantling sculptures erected in public places considered by the Hefazat as un-Islamic symbols. Hefazat represents a very narrow, obscurantist view of Islam, akin to the Taliban of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Its march in Dhaka on 5 May 2013 drew a crowd of nearly half a million madrasah students, teachers and sympathizers. The government had to apply considerable force to eject the protesters from their sit-in. Hefazat's meteoric rise suggests that

the Quomi madrassahs, so far considered by the political elites as the abode of the poor and neglected, have now developed into a potent political force.

It should be noted that Bangladesh has both private Quomi madrassahs and state-sponsored Alia madrassahs. Whilst the latter follow a syllabus that includes subjects such as English, science and mathematics, the former are not subject to regulation. Today there are estimated 6,500 Quomi madrassahs in Bangladesh, enrolling almost 1.5 million students (Anam, 2011). Despite the considerable success of overseas non-governmental organizations in offering educational opportunities in addition to the formal schooling system provided by the state, there remain millions of potential students who are not covered by the state system.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past 20 years, an influential body of conservative scholarship has focused on the alleged conflict between Islam and the West (Huntington, 1996; Scruton, 2002; Lewis, 2004). Following widespread criticism of this scholarship, a number of commentators have revived its core assumptions to claim that the real conflict is between democracy within Muslim societies and the political ideology of Islamism (Tibi, 2002; Habeck, 2007). In response, and against the claim that democracy will be undermined by Islamism, which was arguably the case in Egypt until the military takeover in 2013, a number of scholars have identified a phenomenon of post-Islamism, and the potential subordination of religion to the demands of democratic competition within Muslim societies such as Indonesia and Turkey (Bayat, 2007; Wright, 2012).

The debate is limited, however, insofar as it ignores a third possibility, which occurs when a government of an allegedly secular state promotes Islam for its own legitimacy (both domestic and international) and electoral gain. Pakistan is an excellent example of this phenomenon. So, incidentally, is Bangladesh, the focus of this article, in which we have traced the decline of secular nationalism since 1971, exploring the reasons for and the ways in which both military and civilian governments have sought to retain external and popular support by promoting Islam throughout the country. When religion is used in this way for opportunistic reasons, it creates the space for more radical (and violent) groups to participate in an increasingly dangerous political game.

At the time of writing, the Awami League portrays itself as the heir to the revolutionary forces that contributed to the liberation of Bangladesh. In so doing, the League is trying to attract support from Bangladesh's youth. However, the success of such an attempt appears to be unlikely given the current bleak political situation. Indeed, disaffection with both political parties is widespread, whilst the support base of Islamists has grown steadily over recent years. As a result, there is a strong possibility that the Islamists will become a formidable political force in Bangladesh in the years to come. The outcome of the International Crimes Tribunal initiated by the Awami League against the BJI will play an essential part in shaping that future. Presently, a major reservation among many Bangladeshi people towards the BJI derives from the allegation that their top leaders were involved in crimes against

humanity during the war and opposed the country at its birth (see Jalil, 2010). Once its leadership has been transferred to younger generations who were not born during the 1970s, however, it will become harder to label BJI as the party that opposed the liberation force, and its support base may continue to expand.

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