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Issue Brief

Hefajat-e-Islami and the Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh

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Summary

In the last few years, the Awami League (AL) strengthened Islamist groups like the Hefajat-e-Islami (Hel) by accommodating its demands, even as moderate Islamists were alienated. Fundamentally though, the ideologies of the AL and Hel stand opposed to each other. After the death of Allama Shah Ahmed Shafi, the Amir of Hel on September 18, 2020, the takeover of the group by radical leaders like Juniad Babunagori, who are opposed to the government, reflects the limitation of the latter's appeasement policy. While the ulemas may not be electorally successful, their street power and ideological commitment to their interpretation of religion will push the government to further Islamise the social sphere. That will pave the way for the ultimate political success of the Islamists.

After the death of Allama Shah Ahmed Shafi, the Amir of Hefajat-e-Islami (HeI), on September 18, 2020, the new leadership of Juniad Babunagori and other hardline Islamists dominate the Shura of HeI. Shafi, a firebrand Islamist, had brought the Awami League (AL) government to its knees by demonstrating his organisation's street power in 2013. However, he unhesitatingly cooperated with the government after that, till his death. What does Ahmed Shafi's death mean for ulema politics in Bangladesh? Will Juniad Babunagori, who succeeded Shafi after a major power tussle to take over the Hathazari madarassa, continue with his legacy?

Ulema politics

HeI mostly consisted of erstwhile ulema political parties whose political visibility reduced after the AL assumed power. This was especially so in the context of the weakening of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main ally of the ulema political parties, and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), the dominant religious political party committed to Sharia rule. This was after the BNP-led alliance lost the 2008 election. The dominant ulema group, the Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ), left the BNP-led four-party alliance in 2012. The HeI emerged in 2010 and made its mark as a united front of the ulemas in Bangladesh.¹

Ulema politics in the country largely remained confined to regulation of madrassas, shaping the attitude of the government towards religion and preservation of Islam. Though the Anjuman-i-Ulama-i-Bangala was one of the first platforms that brought together the ulemas in the United Bengal province, it lost its lustre after partition. Even though the Jamaat-ul-Islam Pakistan (JuIP) dabbled in politics and later some ulemas joined with other political parties to demand implementation of *Nizam-e-Mustafa*, ulema politics has always remained fragmented.

Post-liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, religious political parties were banned. General Zia ur Rahman lifted the ban and brought substantial changes to the constitution through the Fifth Amendment after he took over power as Chief Martial Law Administrator and President in 1977. The JeI participated in the 1979 elections as part of Islamic Democratic League and won six seats. The 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution also inspired the Bangladeshi ulemas.² However, ulema-led political parties were not able to muster much electoral support, compared to the well-knit and well-resourced JeI. The declaration of Islam as state religion activated some ulemas under the Islami Shasonotantra Anadolan.

After Bangladesh re-entered into democratic politics military rule in 1990, the ulemas became active but still could not succeed electorally. The IoJ, for instance,

¹ Islami Shashonotantra Andolan, Khelafat Majlis, Islami Bastobayan (Islamic Law Implementation) Committee, Nezami Islam Party were some of the constituents of that front.

² Ahmed Shariful Huque and Mohammad Yeha Akhtar, "The ubiquity of Islam: Religion and society in Bangladesh", *Pacific Affairs*, 60(2), 1987, p. 206.

managed to get two seats in 2001. Organisations formed and led by the ulema though have been at the forefront of the Islamisation drive in Bangladesh, both in the social and political sphere. They control the country's vast Quami madrassas that do not follow the government-approved syllabus taught in the government-run Aliya madrassas. Rather, the students of these madrassas focus on the conservative Dars Nizami that deals with Islamic jurisprudence.

The ulemas in Bangladesh have always gathered under the leadership of those who control big madrassas. Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini, a faction of IOJ, for instance, controlled the Lal Bagh and Boro Katra madrassas in Dhaka. The Islami Shasonotantra Andolon Ameer, Syed Mohammad Fazlul Karim, popularly known as Charmonia Pir, who was also part of the IoJ, controls a large madrassa in Charmonia, Barishal. Sheikh Azizul Haque controlled the Jamia Rahmania Arabia madrassa in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. Since many of these ulemas have since died, there was a void in ulema politics. Some of the ulemas earlier associated with IOJ, are now part of HeI.³

Politics of HeI

While Hefajat claims it is apolitical, as they do not participate in electoral politics, they are at the forefront of accumulating religious capital and have emerged as important players in Bangladeshi politics. HeI, which literally means 'protector of Islam', was established in 2010 as a reaction to the Draft National Women's Development Policy Bill, proposed by the military-backed caretaker government in 2008. The women's bill was finally passed by the Awami League government in 2011, providing equal rights to women in property 'through earnings, inheritance, loan, land and market management'.⁴ Taking into account the protest of ulemas and other religious political parties, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina assured that these rights will be subjected to Shariah law.

The ulemas also feared that the Hasina government may engage in "anti-Islam[ic] activities", especially after the Supreme Court in 2010 declared the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution that made sweeping change to the 1973 secular constitution, as illegal. There were apprehensions, that, as a result of this decision, the government may restore the 1973 Constitution and place a ban on religious political parties. While the government restored secularism and some other original articles through the 15th Amendment, fearing backlash from the Islamists, it allowed the continuation of Islam as the state religion.

³ Islami Oikya Jote, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, Khelafat Andolan, Islami Andolan Bangladesh, Islami Oikya Andolan, Jamiatul Ulama Islam are some of the religious political parties that are now part of Hefajat.

⁴ Kaberi Gayen, "[Equal property right: Much ado about nothing](#)", *The Daily Star*, March 08, 2019.

In 2013, the HeI proved that it is a force to reckon with, when thousands of madrassa students marched to Dhaka with a 13-point charter of demands. These included a demand for death sentence for those committing blasphemy, declaring Qadianis as non-Muslims and implementing other stringent Islamic laws.⁵ The government, sensing trouble, ordered a midnight raid in which some madrassa students were killed. Though Hefajat swore to take revenge and not forget the blood shed by the students who were labelled as ‘martyrs’, it entered into negotiations with the government, asking for compensation for those who were killed and withdrawal of criminal cases against its cadres.

Realising the potential of the group to disrupt, especially at a time when the Shahbag protests were going on and war crime trials against those who collaborated with Pakistani regime against the liberation were being conducted, the government tried to win the Hefajat over to its side. It arrested bloggers under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Information and Communication Technology Act of Bangladesh, 2006, for “hurting religious sentiments”.⁶ The government sought help from the party-affiliated Ulema League and Anjumaan-e-Baiyanat, to counter the HeI.

Interestingly, the head of Anjuman al-Baiyanat, Allama Muhammad Mahbub Alam, had not only announced rewards to kill the apostates, but also submitted a list of 84 bloggers to the government in 2013, demanding punishment for their involvement in anti-Islamic activities.⁷ The Hefajat was even successful in seeing that there is no publication that is critical of Islam. In fact, following the hacking of around 12 activists, bloggers, publishers and writers by Islamic terrorist groups in 2015⁸, the Bangla Academy that organises the Ekushey Boi mela (an annual book fair) to commemorate language martyrs, started scrutinising the books that are sold or displayed in the fair for its content.⁹

Many accuse the Hefajat of benefitting monetarily by collaborating with the government. It received donations from the people associated with the AL. To strengthen the hand of Shafi and his son, Anas Madani — who favoured HeI’s relations with AL, the government leased 33 acres of railway land for expansion of the Hathazari madrassa in Chittagong. To appease the Islamists, it asked the bloggers to refrain from criticising Islam and passed a stringent Digital Security Act to prevent online activities that may not go down well with the Islamists.

In 2017, when the government introduced the same text books that are taught in the regular schools for the madrassas, Hefajat asked for removal of certain poems and

⁵ “[Hefajat demands](#)”, *The Daily Star*, April 6, 2013.

⁶ Md. Sanaul Islam Tipu, “[Court indicts 4 bloggers](#)”, *Dhaka Tribune*, September 9, 2013.

⁷ “[‘Atheist’ bloggers to ‘repent’](#)”, March 31, 2013.

⁸ For details, See Smruti S Pattanaik, “Growing radicalism in Bangladesh: Assessing state response”, in S.D. Muni and Vivek Chadha ed., *Terrorism: Emerging Trends* (New Delh: Pentagon Press, 2016), p. 229.

⁹ See Maliha Khan, “[Censorship and the Boi Mela](#)”, *The Daily Star*, February 9, 2020.

other essays from the secondary school textbook. Appeasing the HeI, the government removed 17 popular poems and stories by non-Muslim and secular writers.¹⁰ These included Darwin's theory of evolution, as Hefajat considers such writings to promote atheism.¹¹ The government was in fact forced to change many Christian and Hindu-sounding names and replace them with Islamic names.¹²

The group went to the extent of demanding that the government replace Prof Narayan Chandra Saha, a Hindu, from the position of Chairman of National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB).¹³ Though the government did not accede to their demand, they were successful in the removal of his name from the textbook which states he is the chairman of the NCTB. Giving in to the Hefajat's demand, in 2017, the government removed the statue of the Greek goddess, Themis, from the Supreme Court premises. In 2018, perhaps keeping an eye on the elections that year, the government passed a bill recognising a top Quami madrasa degree, Dawra-e-Hadith, as equivalent to a Master's degree in Islamic studies and Arabic. This was considered a major victory for the Quami madrassas. The mutually beneficial relation between the AL and the HeI helped the latter's political rise.

Power struggle to control Hefajat

After the failed agitation in Dhaka's Shapla Chottor on May 5, 2013, there were differences of opinion within the HeI. Babu Nagori, who was then the General Secretary of the organisation, was opposed to Shafi's close contacts with the AL government, especially after the brutal police action in Dhaka on the protesters in 2013. The differences of opinion came to a head when Ahmad Shafi decided to honour Prime Minister Hasina for passing the bill recognising the madrasa degree. Juniad Babunagori's uncle, Mohibullah Babunagori, resigned from his position as the Secretary General of the organisation on October 3, along with other leaders, for not being consulted over the issue. Several leaflets were circulated by unidentified people against the function. Many of the senior leaders stayed away from the thanksgiving ceremony, where Hasina was declared the Quami mother by Ahmad Shafi. This coming together of AL and HeI though was a crucial factor that helped in the AL's 2014 and 2018 electoral victories.

The death of HeI supremo Shafi has brought the power tussle for succession between Anas Madani, Shafi's son and Juniad Babunagori, out in the open. Since 2019, the rivalry between senior Nayeb-e-Ameer, Mohibullah Babunagari and Anas Madani, came to the fore. A day before Ahmed Shafi's death, he resigned from the position of

¹⁰ See Mahadi Al Hasnat , "[Corrections, but no changes in school textbooks](#)", *Dhaka Tribune*, July 21, 2017.

¹¹ "[পাঠ্যবই থেকে বিবর্তনবাদ তত্ত্ব বাদ দেওয়ার দাবি বাবুনগরীর](#)," *Bangla Tribune*, July 12, 2019.

¹² Ellen Barry and Julfikar Ali Manik, "[To secular Bangladeshis, textbook changes are a harbinger](#)", *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017.

¹³ Ibid

Rector of the madrassa, following student unrests over a host of issues that afflicted the functioning of the Hathazari madrassa. Before resigning, he also sacked his son, a contender for succession, for mismanagement and corruption in the Quami Madrassa Education Board, which controls over 25,000 madrassas. Many also think that this resignation was stage managed by a group of people close to Juniad Babunagori, who were opposed to Shafi's succession plan.¹⁴

The leadership of HeI is now firmly in the hands of Juniad Babunagori, who had fallen out with Shafi in October 2018. On June 17, 2020, Juniad Babunagori, who was close to his uncle, was relieved of duty as assistant director by the Shura committee of Madrassas. Instead, Maulana Sheikh Ahmed, a senior teacher of the madrassa, was given the responsibility of the associate director. Hundreds of students demonstrated on Chattogram-Khagrachhari Road and vandalised the offices of Anas Madani and Shafi against the decision.

It was apparent before the death of his father that Anas Madani was losing out in the group's internal power struggle. Powerful ulemas from Dhaka and Chittagong supported Juniad Babunagori. Not surprisingly, after the death of Ahmed Shafi, Juniad Babunagori constituted a new Shura and got himself elected as the Amir of HeI and Maulana Nur Hossain Kasemi, Naib-e-Amir, became the new secretary general. Kasemi was earlier the general secretary of Jamiat-e-Ulama-ye-Islam and had resigned from that party. The factionalism within Hefajat continues which may have implications for the cohesion of the group, which was held tightly by Ahmed Shafi for the last ten years.¹⁵ The all-powerful Shura committee which Juniad Babunagori heads makes appointments to various important positions. Both Juniad Babunagori and Kasemi have been close to the BNP in the past. This brings forth the question, what is the future of HeI and ulema politics in Bangladesh?

Future of Islamist politics

After his election as Amir of HeI, Juniad Babunagori stated that the group will work towards establishing Islam and to uproot anti-Islamic forces. He even asserted that the group would shed blood to protect Islam.¹⁶ Hefajat is aiming to occupy the Islamist political space which is organisationally vacant at the moment due to de-registration of JeI and the government's continued action against the party which has crippled its functioning. The Jamaat has been lying low politically since the

¹⁴ Rashidul Hasan and F.M. Mizanur Rahaman, "[A battle brewing over Hefajat helm.](#)" *The Daily Star*, September 20, 2020.

¹⁵ A.F. M. Khalid Hossein, "হেফাজতের নতুন নেতৃত্ব চ্যালেঞ্জ ও প্রত্যাশা", (Challenges and expectation before Hefajat's new leadership), *Naya Diganta*, November 22, 2020.

¹⁶ "হেফাজতের নতুন আমির বাবুনগরী, কাসেমী মহাসচিব." (Hefajat's New Amir Babunagori, Kasemi General Secretary), *Bangla Tribune*, November 15, 2020.

arrest and hanging of its leaders on charges of committing war crimes. It tried to bring Hefajat to its side in 2013 to orchestrate anti-government demonstrations.

Interestingly, the AL also tried to win over the Hefajat as well, to deny political space to the BNP-aligned Islamic political parties, mainly the Jamaat. It was also necessary, as any confrontation with Islamists, especially Hefajat, which has demonstrable street power, would have led to political instability. Moreover, the government also wanted some Islamic political parties to be on its side to maintain its Islamic credentials as well as to prevent unity among the Islamists.

The big question is whether Hefajat has a political agenda to remain relevant in Bangladesh politics. After successfully gaining recognition for its Quami madrassa degree, it has moved forth with its other social agendas. Not only HeI but the BNP-led Somomona Islami Dal (similar thinking Islamic Parties), organised a large-scale demonstration in Dhaka against the French President Emanuel Macron for his recent remarks on the cartoons of the Prophet Mohamed.

HeI is gaining larger traction among political parties who are vying for public space. There were reports that even some of JeI leaders were present at the funeral of former Ahmed Shafi. Jamaat was embittered by the HeI's reluctance to fight against the government, after its cadres were killed in 2013. Though there are theological differences between Jamaat and ulemas, JeI has always benefited from the politics of religion and both the JeI and ulema leaders had entered into co-habitation with each other. The BNP enjoys close relations with some of the constituent parties of HeI. In 2012, the IoJ had left the BNP saying that the ulemas needed to be united to charter an independent policy.

The government is currently bothered by the opposition to the installation of a statue of Mujib in Dhaka's Dholaipar Square, which the Hefajat terms as un-Islamic and harmful. Some ministers have said that the government will initiate criminal cases against Hefajat activists for indulging in violence in their demonstration at Shapla Chatter. A sculpture of Mujib in Khustia was broken.

In the last few years, the AL strengthened the HeI by accommodating its demands, while moderate Islamic forces have remained alienated. Fundamentally though, the ideologies of the AL and HeI stand opposed to each other. The takeover of HeI by more radical leaders opposed to the government only reflects the limitation of the latter's appeasement policy. While the ulemas may not be electorally successful; their street power and ideological commitment to their interpretation of religion will push the government to further Islamise the social sphere. That will pave the way for the ultimate political success of the Islamists.

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