

Deletion of Secularism from Bangladesh's Democracy

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Abstract

India not only faces growing religious extremism and terrorism emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also from Bangladesh, particularly after the undemocratic toppling of the Sheikh Hasina regime on 05 Aug 2024. After lifting the ban on Islamist parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, the new interim government led by Professor Muhammad Yunus has done little to stop rabid extremists from stepping out of the woodwork and attack religious minorities, particularly the Hindu community in the country. The new draft constitution also proposes removing the word 'Secularism' from the text and suggests introduction of vague, poorly defined terms like 'Equality', 'Human Dignity', 'Social Justice', etc. The internal stability and impressive economic growth achieved by the country in recent years now face major headwinds, and the removal of Sheikh Hasina in an unconstitutional manner raises questions about the country's commitment to democracy. This article examines the complex political dialectic between secularism and religious forces in Bangladesh since its establishment and analyses the continuing deterioration in India's relations with its eastern neighbour.

Introduction

Since the time of its formation, Bangladesh has had a splintered national identity. Having partitioned from India in the name of Islam in 1947, this once geographically non-contiguous and culturally incompatible province of Pakistan eventually gained independence as a sovereign nation in 1971.

However, the creation of Bangladesh could not fully resolve the issue of national identity, which remains critical for taking any country towards self-actualisation. On the face of it, the separation from Pakistan disproved Jinnah's 'Two-nation Theory', yet large sections of the country's Muslim population still adhere to notions of religious exclusivity at the expense of its inherent historical, geographical, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic linkages with India's pluralist ethos.

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The erosion of secular principles and rise of religious nativism in Bangladesh, especially after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's 15-year-long rule in Aug last year, is another failed attempt of the country at self-discovery. Consequently, the student-led undemocratic coup has led to marginalisation of Bangladeshi citizens belonging to minority communities in the country. An alarming rise in public support for Sharia law, surprisingly even among the educated elite, is fast turning Bangladesh's relatively secular and inclusive polity into an Islam-centric one.

The Deletion of Secularism

In fact, Bangladesh's newly instituted Constitution Reform Commission proposes the deletion of the word 'Secularism' from the preamble and Part II of the constitution.¹ The report also calls on the interim government to scrap two other principles—namely, 'Socialism' and 'Nationalism'—from the Constitution.

Only the ideal of 'Democracy' tenuously hangs as a key principle in the preamble, albeit some new ambivalent terms like 'Equality', 'Human Dignity', 'Social Justice', and 'Pluralism' have been introduced to cushion the blow.²

This constitutional change indicates that Bangladesh's slippery slope towards political and economic turmoil, which even threatens much of the economic progress achieved under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. As radical Islam slowly bares its face out of the student-led 'Revolution' of last year, many commentators fear that these groups now pervade vital sectors of civil and military establishment. As for the Nobel Prize-winning leader of the interim government, Muhammad Yunus, the octogenarian, has proven, to say the least, inept in reining in Islamist radicals from destabilising the country.

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The Rise of Radical Islam: Threat to Minorities

In fact, Yunus has not only sought the extradition of Sheikh Hasina, who has been living in India since Aug 2024 when she left Bangladesh following the massive student-led protests, but has even urged Bangladesh's politicians to put up a united front to counter what he called 'Indian Aggression'.³

Unsurprisingly, the liberal face of Yunus and the student protest started peeling off just after the end of Sheikh Hasina's ouster, when the 12-year-long anti-terrorism ban on the country's largest Islamist group, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir, was revoked within a month of Yunus' coming into office.⁴ There is also news that the 2009 ban on the pro-caliphate movement Hizb ut-Tahrir might be lifted soon.⁵ Conversely, the interim government has officially banned the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party, labelling it as a 'Terrorist Organisation', with the now influential far-right Islamic advocacy group Hefazat-e-Islam Andolan has demanded a ban on Awami League as well.⁶

As radical groups increase their activism in the country, incidents of violence and harassment of minority groups—particularly Bangladesh's Hindu community—have witnessed an increase, despite the Yunus government's persistent denial of the worsening situation. For instance, in Nov last year, Dhaka Metropolitan Police announced the arrest of Hindu religious leader Chinmoy Krishna Das, former leader of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which was followed by student protests that sought a ban on the Hindu spiritual movement ISKCON. A massive social media disinformation campaign was launched, alleging that the strictly spiritual and apolitical Hindu organisation was working as an agent of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party and the Indian government.⁷ The court even denied bail to the revered ISKCON leader on the pretext that he faced sedition charges.⁸

This incident is just one of the rapidly escalating number of violent attacks, atrocities, and harassment faced by minority communities in the country. Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, a respected body protecting rights of minorities, has charged the Yunus government with using state institutions to suppress the rights of religious minorities.

According to the council, a total of 2,010 incidents of communal violence took place across the Muslim-majority country from 04 to 20 Aug in 2024, during and after the toppling of the Sheikh Hasina's government. However, the Yunus-led dispensation has dismissed the figures and said that most of these cases were caused by 'Political Reasons' and not by communal issues.

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The council goes further by enumerating 174 new incidents breaking out between 21 Aug and 31 Dec 2024, in which 23 members of minority groups were killed and nine women were raped. In addition to Hindus, who constitute about 8 per cent of the Bangladeshi population, Christian, Buddhist, Ahmadi, and indigenous minorities have also come under attack.

Equally alarming is the growing association of Bangladeshi radical Islamists blatantly forging ties with violent extremist groups in the Muslim world. In Oct, a high-profile religious event was organised by Al-Markazul Islami (AMI) in the country, in which several radical Islamist leaders from Hamas, the Taliban, and Pakistan participated. The founder of AMI, the recently deceased Mufti Shahidul Islam, is well-known to have had direct links with al-Qaeda, which raises questions about the motives in hosting the event.⁹

Thus, the change in government has opened the door for Islamist groups of all kinds to influence the country's political landscape. Among the many Islamist political parties, the most prominent are Bangladesh JI, Islami Oikya Jote, and Islami Andolan Bangladesh.¹⁰ Other Islamist parties include Islamic Front Bangladesh, Bangladesh Islami Front, Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan,

Bangladesh Muslim League, Bangladesh Supreme Party, Ashekane Auwlia Oikya Parishad, and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Bangladesh. Out of these “The JI Bangladesh, the Hefazat-e-Islam Andolan, and Bangladesh Awami Olama League have openly called to make the country an Islamic state”.¹¹

Among the banned jihadist groups are Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB)—which is an offshoot of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB); the Ansarullah Bangla Team, an affiliate of al-Qaeda and Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI) of Pakistan; and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as well.¹²

According to the 2022 census, Bangladesh has a population of about 150 million Muslims, amounting to 91.04 per cent of its total population of 165 million.¹³ In the face of massive political and economic challenges, the country has been struggling with calls for a Shariah-based political system that serve as a panacea for all ills. Back in 2013, a survey by Pew Research Center revealed that about 82 per cent of Muslims in the country favour making Islam's Sharia the official law of the land.¹⁴ Another survey conducted by Resolve Network in 2017 found that “A surprising number of well-to-do and well-educated Bangladeshis indicate ... support for violent extremist tactics”, with women showing greater support for radicalism than men.¹⁵

Wave of Anti-Mujibism: Bengali versus Bengladeshi Dialectic

In order to press the reset button, the country is even turning against its secular and socialist values, the most glaring example of which was a mob of so-called protestors vandalising and then burning down the house (now a museum) of their country's founder, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of deposed Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina. On 05 Feb 2025, the protestors had arrived at the Dhanmondi 32 area and threatened to raze the house with bulldozers, while police forces looked the other way.^{16,17}

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The protests came in the wake of Sheikh Hasina's broadcast via Facebook Live, in which she claimed that Muhammad Yunus had orchestrated a scheme to assassinate her. She has earlier even criticised the present dispensation in the country of perpetrating ‘Genocide’ and failing to protect minorities, especially Hindus. For its part, Yunus' interim government and Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal has charged Hasina and her former cabinet ministers, advisers, and military and civil officials with ‘Crimes against humanity and genocide’. The interim government has claimed that around 3,500 citizens suffered from enforced disappearances throughout Hasina's tenure. More than 200 cases, including that of murder, have been filed against Hasina since her ouster.¹⁸ Surprisingly, the Yunus-led administration has even held Hasina indirectly responsible for the attack on her father's house in Dhanmondi through her provocative speeches.¹⁹

There is no denying that the intensity of hate against Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh is partially the result of her own shortcomings, particularly her inability to hold on to the public support that once propelled her to high office. For one, her rule was constantly marred by allegations of corruption and regression that gradually eroded her legitimacy. Although Hasina got a second-consecutive term in office with her ruling Awami League and its Grand Alliance allies winning the 2014 general elections by a landslide, the victory is said to have been secured due to boycott by leading opposition parties due to alleged non-partisan administration to conduct elections. Even her fifth term in Jan 2024 was secured in an election after the top leadership of opposition parties (like the Bangladesh National Party [BNP]) was either imprisoned or exiled, drawing condemnation from western countries, like the United States and the United Kingdom, deeming the elections neither free nor fair.^{20,21}

According to political experts like Sian Herbert, Hasina's repression of political opposition as well as the shrinking of democratic freedoms created "The space for extremist groups to flourish" and "Has generated a violent backlash".²²

The rise of political Islam and modern jihadism is not a recent phenomenon. With the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, many political experts at the time mistakenly surmised that Bengali nationalism had brought an end to 'Political Islam' or Islam-based state ideology of the Pakistani period (1947–71). In fact, many scholars to this day claim that creation of Bangladesh invalidates the two-nation theory, which led to the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Although it is true that Bangladesh adopted the four-pronged state ideology of secularism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism. Unfortunately, Mujibur Rahman's rule was marred by brutal repression against left-wing insurgency, economic mismanagement, and eventually led to the Second Revolution (1975), which installed a one-party regime and abolition of all civil liberties. In revolt against the unimpeachable life-long presidency of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his assassination and a military coup d'état took place in Aug 1975, and a more Islam-oriented state ideology, shunning secularism and socialism, was introduced by the new ruler General (Gen) Ziaur Rahman in Nov 1975.

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In order to highlight the Muslim identity of the country, Gen Rahman replaced the outwardly secular 'Bengali Nationalism' with 'Bangladeshi Nationalism', to differentiate the Muslim-majority Bengalis from their Hindu-majority counterparts in West Bengal in India.²³ Like many other Muslim nations, notes Taj I Hashmi, that "Bangladeshi Muslims suffer from a tremendous identity crisis. They are not sure which comes first—their loyalty toward Islam or toward Bangladesh".²⁴

During Gen Rahman's rule, the Quranic verse, 'Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Raheem' (Beginning with the name of Allah, Most Merciful and Most Beneficent), was added to the Preamble of the Constitution. There was compulsory broadcast of *azaan* (Islamic call to prayer) on radio and television five times a day, and a new Division of Religious Affairs under a full minister was introduced.²⁵

In the early 1980s, under the dictatorship of Gen Hussein Muhammad Ershad, Islamisation picked up further pace. His rule brought about the establishment of *zakat* (Islamic charity) fund, frequent visits by the ruler to mosques and Muslim shrines, and liberal grants to Islamic institutions. Then, on 7 Jun 1988, Gen Ershad declared Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh through eighth amendment to the constitution. This raised valid apprehensions among the religious minorities in the country and led to the formation of Hindu-Buddha-Christian Okiya Parishad (United Council), which seeks to protect their rights and interests. The end of Gen Ershad's military regime ushered in the rule of democratic parties in the 1990s.

Since then, the political dialectic between Bangladesh's two main political parties—the avowedly secular and nationalist Awami League (founded by Mujibur Rahman and then led his daughter Sheikh Hasina) versus the more Islam-oriented BNP (founded by Gen Rahman and now led by his widow Khaleda Zia), with its Islamist allies like JI—have largely charted the course of Bangladesh's tumultuous journey.

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After becoming PM in 1991, Khaleda Zia extended state support and expanded *madrassa* (Islamic school) education, even as new Islamic organisations like Ahl-i-Hadith raised campaigns against the country's Ahmadi population. Islamists also launched campaigns for the arrest of secular intellectuals and issued death threats against writers like Taslima Nasreen on charges of heresy.²⁶

The coming to power of Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League (1996–2001) revived the philosophy of separation of state and religion, yet the period witnessed a rise in incidents of violent extremism. The re-election of Khaleda Zia as premier in 2001, at the head of a combine that included JI, unleashed a phase of violence against the Hindu community, with JMB, JMJB, and HuJI leading the campaign. In 2007–08, most of the top leaders of JMB were executed following a court verdict.

Still, there were several attacks on secular and atheist writers, foreigners, homosexuals, and religious minorities between 2013 and 2016. By 02 Jul 2016, a total of 48 people were killed in such attacks.^{27,28}

A belated but heavy crackdown by the Hasina government in 2016 led to the arrests of tens of thousands of people, putting an end to the spate of attacks.²⁹ The Hasina government also sought to restore the secular provisions of the Constitution, watered down after the initial years of independence, even though Islam remains the state religion of Bangladesh.

Involvement of Foreign Agencies: Challenges Facing India

With the ouster of Sheikh Hasina from power, the transitional government in Bangladesh is deepening its relations with countries inimical to India's geopolitical interests, mainly Pakistan, China, and Turkey.

Over the past few months, Bangladesh and Pakistan have held multiple high-level defence meetings and intelligence exchanges, which indicates a perceptible thaw in a historically fraught relationship. In Jan 2025, Bangladesh's Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Mohammad Nazmul Hassan met with Pakistan's Army Chief Gen Syed Asim Munir Ahmed Shah in Rawalpindi, which marked the second high-level military engagement between the states within a month.³⁰

Earlier, a Bangladeshi military delegation led by Lieutenant Gen SM Kamrul Hasan has held talks with Pakistani Army, Air Force, and Navy chiefs in Rawalpindi. Bangladesh's participation in the multinational naval exercise hosted by Pakistan, where China has also sent a large delegation, points to Dhaka's growing ties with Islamabad and Beijing, which is a cause for concern.³¹ It is also reported that Dhaka has hosted Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief and several other senior Pakistani military officials since the fall of Sheikh Hasina government in Aug last year.³²

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This Pakistan-Bangladesh bonhomie seems to corroborate India's intelligence agency reports that ISI and China were behind the escalation of protests in Bangladesh.³³ It has been reported that the blueprint for Operation Regime Change in Bangladesh was drafted between BNP's acting chairperson Tarique Rahman and ISI officials in Saudi Arabia. It has been reported that the Pakistani Army and ISI wanted to destabilise Sheikh Hasina's government and install the BNP into power.³⁴ As brought out earlier, Bangladesh reportedly took part in a multinational naval exercise hosted by Pakistan, which also saw a significant delegation from China, including several officials from the People's Liberation Army.

In Jan, Muhammad Yunus held talks with visiting Turkish trade delegation and asked Turkiye to bring its technology to the South Asian country and help build defence industry. In response, Turkish Trade Minister Omer Bolat called for diversifying economic cooperation beyond the textile industry, and cover health care, pharmaceuticals, farm machinery and particularly defence

industry. He even said, “We can replace India and other markets in Bangladesh’s imports. There can be cooperation in economic and social fields at all levels”.³⁵

It is disconcerting to note that Bangladesh might become the fourth largest market for Turkish military goods and is inducting the Bayraktar TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles, Turkish Otokar Kobra II infantry mobility vehicles, mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles, Otokar Kobra I light armoured fighting vehicles, RN-94 armoured ambulances, TRG-300 Tiger multiple launch rocket system, and TRG-230 surface-to-surface missiles.³⁶

Conclusion

The rise of religious nativism and growing Islamist orientation of Bangladeshi polity poses potential threats to Indian security and vital interests. The radicalisation of Bangladeshi youth and their linkages with global Islamist powers and jihadist networks could fuel violence and militancy in India’s border states.

In this respect, the facetious remark made by a senior BNP leader that Bangladesh was preparing to ‘Capture’ West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha would do little to restore the already strained ties between New Delhi and Dhaka.³⁷

The longstanding issue of illegal immigration of Bangladeshis into India, particularly in West Bengal, Assam, and other northeastern states, may worsen in the prevailing environment.

With greater instability, fuelled by rabid radicalism in the country, more Bangladeshis as well as Rohingya refugees stationed in that country might migrate and pose a greater threat to the security of India’s border states.

It has been found that among these undocumented migrants, many have been found to be criminals, radical extremists, or agents working for hostile foreign powers. The rising number of illegal and undocumented Bangladeshi migrants has led to increased tensions over of resource allocations, demographic inversion, social integration, and political representation.

Thus, Dhaka should understand that India and Bangladesh share a common destiny and their geographical and cultural links can neither be supplanted nor replaced by non-contiguous ‘Neighbours’ in the name of religion or common national interests.

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