

## **Muslim Identity, Bengali Nationalism: The use of Islamic and secular Identities in Bangladesh**

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### ***Abstract***

*In Bangladesh, there seem to be two kinds of nationalism: Bangladeshi and Bengali nationalism. Bengali nationalism has its roots in the ancient culture and heritage of the Bengali people. Bangladesh and West Bengal currently share the former Bengali region that was formerly known as Bengal. Bangladesh gained its independence as a result of two distinct historical revolutions. The first liberation was part of Pakistan because of their ideology, which was at the time being controlled by the British. The second liberation from Pakistan was founded on secular Bengali nationalism and was achieved in 1971. After the liberation of Bangladesh, "Bangladeshi nationalism," emerged, primarily based on a distinct religion or geographic region. While Gellner and Anderson claimed that nations and nationalism are exaggerations and imagined communities, Bangladesh established, controlled, and emphasized nationalism by the elite society, which is an important point to consider. In Bangladeshi politics, both nationalism is generating numerous disputes. This article examines the main campaign promises by the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) in each general election from 1991 to 2008, and how they exercised national identity based on religious beliefs to gain power and authority.*

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Bengali, Awami League, BNP, Bangladesh

### **Background of the study**

Bangladesh is a secular state according to its constitution. The AL practices the concept of secularism in its actions and policies. The BNP practices Bangladeshi Nationalism, which owns the majority of the Muslim faith, regardless of whether they are not fundamentalists.

In every election, however, both political parties engage in religious activities to gain the support of voters.

### **Methodology**

Secondary data are the key source of this research from Journal Articles, Books, and newspapers.

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## **Introduction**

Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism, the two contentious political orientations that have shaped Bangladesh's 50-year existence: the one based on language and the second based on religious beliefs. In the years after 1975, the dispute over national identity, whether Bengali or Bangladeshi, emerged as a major political issue in the country. Bangladesh demonstrates that the two strong leaders Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Major General Zia ur Rahman were guided in their creation of nationalism in Bangladesh respectively, by two different types of intellectuals. With a revived consciousness of the Bengali identity, Bangladesh's struggle for independence in 1971 was waged. The Bengali nationalism of BAL is founded on the heritage of Bangladesh struggles for independence. This movement began as a campaign for equal opportunities for the Bengali community in East Pakistan. Following the war, the politicians of the Awami League (AL), who had won the pre-war Pakistani statewide elections in 1970, institutionalized Bengali nationalism by guaranteeing that it was upheld in the country's first constitution. When the military administration sought to establish political power via the formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, they also sparked a new type of citizen status, and religion-based identity in opposition to the AL-owned language-based identity, which they called Bangladeshi nationalism. As challenging parliamentary democracy returned to Bangladesh following the end of the Cold War in 1990, all such two identities have served as the ideological foundations for the country's two largest political groups, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), as well as for their rivalry.

## **The Concept of Nationalism**

Nationalism was initially used in the eighteenth century to describe and promote a state. Within two centuries after the French and American revolutions, the latest era of nationalism emerged that advocated for a united country as well as its political and financial interests, with capitalism being the most prominent of these concerns (Sraders, 2018). Nationalism has been a powerful force in the Western political world. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the tendencies of nationalism gave way to the establishment and reformation of states throughout Europe. The rise of nationalism led to the dissolution of many political entities based on ethnicity, language, religion, etc., which derived their homogeneity and unity. The developing states borrowed the concept of nationalism from the West through the emergence of indigenous uprisings against the colonial power. Many scholars have identified nationalism, but these conceptual frameworks vary in terms of nationalism's substance and characteristics. Nationalism has been seen as a political doctrine of self-determination (Ahmed, 1996). Nationalism can

be seen in this sense as a particularistic ideology designed to differentiate between persons based on specific socio-cultural categories. We claim the right to self-determination based on different cultural categories and assert their sovereignty over territory to emerge as a distinct political entity (Breuilly, 1982). Anderson (2006) provides a definition for the nation, "an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" and "nationalism might be portrayed as collective identities towards imagined communities which are not naturally expressed in language, race or religion but rather socially constructed by the very individuals that belong to a given nation" (Anderson, 2006). Nationalism is associated with a standard that brings people together under one unified banner. A country may present itself with an autonomous and basic nation across the globe by wearing this outfit and claiming to have a distinct identity from the other nations. Nationalism is supported by a significant affiliation of a bunch of participants with a political organisation described in terms of hierarchy, such as a country (Smith, 1993). According to Gellner, nationalism is a democratic worldview that should coexist with international and national institutions (Gellner, 1983). Nationalism is a political philosophy that emphasizes a country's culture, language, and, in certain cases, race. However, it is mainly affected by cultural connections and may also include common literature, games, or the arts as well (Sraders, 2018).

### **Bangladesh and Nationalism**

Bangladesh underwent decolonization multiple times: once in 1947, when it won freedom from the United Kingdom as Pakistan's eastern province, and then again in 1971 when it achieved independence from Pakistan's inner colonialism. Following the independence of Bangladesh in 1975, the dispute over national identity, whether Bengali or Bangladeshi, emerged as a major controversial topic. Bengali nationalism evolved in the post-1947 period largely due to the colonial mindset of Pakistan towards Bangalis. Bengali nationalism is founded on "ethnolinguistic" and "ethnocultural" characteristics, and these characteristics almost certainly had a role in uniting the people who lived in the region known as Bengal during the struggle for liberation (Khan, 2006). Bangladesh got independence in 1971 from Pakistan. Bengali language and ethnicity served as the foundation for Bangladesh's secular democratic unity, which stood in marked contradiction to the nationalism upon which Pakistan was formed from the first (Uddin, 2006). The Awami League, which was at the forefront of the struggle for freedom, was established as a result of the language movement in Bangladesh and was primarily concerned with Bengali nationalism rather than religion (Linter, 2018). After independence, West and East Pakistan engaged in various kinds of conflict. The first is a linguistic dispute. At a public gathering in 1948,

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Mohammed Ali Jinnah declared that Urdu will be the official language of the country of Pakistan as a whole. Dhaka University students immediately rejected his speech and left the meeting. From 1948 until 1952, residents of West Pakistan were vocal in their opposition to this decision. Pakistan's government banned all kinds of agitation on 21 February 1952, but on 21 February 1952, students at Dhaka University ignored the ban and organized a protest. Students were killed and many others were injured when the cops opened fire on them. This has turned out to be a major shock for the Bengali people, who have further reinforced their determination to maintain their distinctness from the West Pakistani culture as a result of this. This protest created a new dimension for East Pakistan nationalism. East Pakistani people began to practice their own Bengali culture in various programs after this language movement in 1952. The inhabitants of East Pakistan developed a strong sense of Bengali nationalism as a result of this conflict. This language is the root of Bengali nationalism and independent Bangladesh (Uddin, 2006).

## **Bangladesh Awami League and the Bengali Nationalism**

Awami League was founded in 1949 to ensure the political and economic rights in East Pakistan. The former name of Awami League was the Awami Muslim League. The Awami Muslim League was renamed the Awami League in 1956 to include more non-Muslims in its political activities. Sheik Mujib proposed the landmark Six-Point proposal in 1966, calling for more autonomy for East Pakistan. In 1969, the East Pakistani people launched a major campaign to demand more autonomy for their country. In the national elections held in December 1970, the Awami League won an overall majority and was poised to seize control of the country's affairs. Bengali nationalism formed the basis for political campaigns conducted between 1969 and 1970 (Khan, 2006). After a nine-month liberation struggle, Sheik Mujib was elected the first president of Bangladesh as the "Father of the Nation." Following Bangladesh's liberation, the Awami League accepted the country's secular and Bengali identities. Bangladesh's constitution, which was recognized after independence in 1971 as secularism rather than Islam, as well as Bengali culture, would serve as the foundation for nationalism in the country (Uddin, 2006). This identity of Bengali was based on culture and language. Attempts were undertaken by the Awami League administration to remove symbols of Islamic history, culture, and politics from the Indian subcontinent in the name of Bangalee nationalism, which paradoxically resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971 (Absar, 2014). Bangladesh was secular but government programs started with Qur'an recitation. Absar (2014) states that "It was customary to initiate public functions with a recitation from the Quran which the new

Bangladesh government eliminated in 1972” (Absar, 2014). Sheik Mujib provided a popular opinion with a new definition of secularism at that time. Sheikh Mujib said, “Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. You are a Mussalman, you perform your religious rites. There is no religiousness on the soil of Bangladesh but there is secularism. This sentence has a meaning and that meaning is that none would be allowed to exploit the people in the name of religion or create such fascist organizations as the Al-Badr, Razakars, etc. No communal politics will be allowed in the country” (Islam, 2018). Absar argues that there was a great deal of misconceptions between Bangladeshi nationalism and Bengali nationalism, which was entangled in language and symbols. After all, if language is the only source of nationalist sentiment, why didn't West Bengal assist the separatist movement in erstwhile East Pakistan? (Absar, 2014). After 3 years of the first national election of Bangladesh, the country began to face economic difficulties soon after independence, further aggravated by the famine of 1974. Many in Bangladesh saw the economic difficulties of the post-liberation years as the personal failure of Mujib and assassinated him and most of his family on 15 August 1975. Then started the new politics of nationalism in Bangladesh (Uddin, 2006).

### **BNP and Bangladeshi nationalism**

While the country was still under military control in 1976, a new nationalist movement was established in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi nationalism was founded on theoretical frameworks this year by Khondker Hamid, working under the command of Major General Zia (Khan, 2006). This nationalist perspective was reinforced by Zia after the establishment of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1976 (Rahman, 2012). Zia argues in 1978, *The Problem of National Identity in Bangladesh*, that since Bangladeshis were distinct from Indian Bengalis in aspects of "culture" and "language," they should be moulded "in our image (Murshid, 2000). Bangladeshi nationalism is a political movement that exalts and encourages the inhabitants of the People's Republic of Bangladesh as a separate cultural and political community (Absar, 2014). There was more to this shift in national identity from Bangali to Bangladeshi than a "semantic" shift. Instead, this was "an effort to incorporate religion into national identity" (Riaz, 2002). When Zia became president in 1977, he changed the constitution to reflect this. The ideology of secularism was supplanted by the religion of faith “absolute confidence and faith in Almighty Allah” and Bangladesh's population has shifted from "Bangladesh" to "Bangladeshi" (Riaz,2002). After a few days, Ziaur Rahman declared Bangladesh as an Islamic Republic. Rahman argues, right-wing Islamists were putting increasing pressure on Zia to proclaim Bangladesh the Islamic Republic of Bangladesh (Rahman,2012). Ziaur Rahman also changed the basic four

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ideologies- democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism of Bangladesh. Attempts were made to amend the constitution to reflect the fundamental principles of Bangladeshi nationalist ideology. Before the preamble of the constitution, the phrase "Bismillahir Rahmanur Rahim" was included. The words liberation "struggle" were supplanted by "war of independence", "secularism" which was read as "economic and social justice; and Article 12 which elaborated the principle of secularism, was obliterated. All these changes paved the way for the return of the Islamic Political parties into the arena of politics" (Rahman, 2012). The core of Zia's ideology was ' religion, the territoriality of identity and national security, ' far removed from the ethnic, linguistic, and secular ideology that led to the creation of Bangladesh (Khan, 2000).

### **The culture of Politics in Bangladesh and the use of nationalism in the election**

The death of Ziaur Rahman, followed by a period of authoritarian rule under Ershad, resulted in the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991. The BNP's 'Bangladeshi' theory is focused on Islamic and geographical identification, while the AL's 'Bengali' campaign is based on a secular Bengali identity (Absar, 2014). Awami League with their Bengali identity and BNP with their Bangladeshi identity used in every election from 1991 to 2008. However, even though the Awami League is a secular political party, they have utilized religion in conjunction with Bengali nationalism to influence mainstream sentiment in every election. The following analyzes the role of religion and secularism in each of the BNP and Awami League in the elections from 1991 to 2008.

### **Religion and Nationalism in the 1991 Election**

The Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) fought each other for control of the country's first democratic elections, which were inspired by nationalism in 1991. Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism were the reasons for this conflict. Both had different campaign goals and tactics to implement throughout the series. While the AL emphasized a mixed economy, an elected administration responsible to the public, and a secular perspective, the BNP emphasized a much more Islamic perspective, a presidential system, and a free-market economy. There were about 2,800 representatives from almost 80 different political groups (Insider, 2009). At the commencement of the democratic period in 1991, the major viewpoints of ideological battle were formed between the ' Bangladeshi Nationalist ' BNP and the ' Bengali Nationalist ' Awami League (Khan, 2000). By this election, Bangladesh was divided into two parts for nationalism. The BNP and Awami League leadership were Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheik Hasina. Both travelled across the country to campaign for election. In the 1991 election campaign in each of her speeches, Khaleda Zia began with the phrases Bissimilah Ar Rahmani-Rahim (in the name of Allah the

Merciful and Kind) and emphasized the Islamic principles inserted into the Constitution by Ziaur Rahman. Sheikh Hasina also started her speech with the same themes that were identical to Sheikh Mujib's, with the main difference being that she talked about constructing the Sonar Bangla that Sheikh Mujib had imagined, the golden period (1972-75) of Sheikh Mujib's leadership, and the punishment of the assassins of Sheikh Mujib (Maniruzzaman, 1992). The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) campaigned on the statement that if the Bangladesh Awami League were to win, they might remove the term "Bismillahirrahmanir Rahim" from the country's constitution. Sheikh Hasina strongly denied this allegation and stated in her campaign that she had no issue with the word 'Bismillah.' “La ilahallallah, Dhaner Shishe Bismillah” (“There is no God save Allah, vote for paddy sheaf saying God the merciful”) was the slogan of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the election of 1991. “La ilahallallah, noukar malik tumi Allah” (“There is no God save Allah, the boat belongs to Allah”) was the slogan of Awami League (Riaz, 2002). Sheik Hasina said that she was committed to establishing a secular democracy in her speeches, yet she used the words Bismillah and religion throughout her speech. And, tragically, in 1991, Sheikh Hasina pledged a secular democracy but made no mention of Bangladesh's defence against Indian imperial expansion (Maniruzzaman, 1992). The BNP gained 140 places in this election, while the Awami League secured 88. No political party has the legal right to form a government. The BNP was then supported by the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jatiya Party, and the BNP went on to form the government. When religious symbols were extensively utilized by all main political parties in the 1991 campaign, it became clear that this was the case. The Awami League, which has long been seen as the leader of secular Bengali nationalism, has also utilized religious symbol manipulation to achieve political objectives. Even the Communist Party's headquarters hosted religious gatherings for its representatives (Mohsin, 1984).

### **Election in 1996**

There was an election for one parliamentary seat in 1994, and the BNP won this seat with its governmental power. Awami League has begun to accuse a caretaker government. After a few days, all the members of the Parliament of the Awami League resigned their seats in parliament and began to fight for the caretaker government to hold the next election in 1996. BNP ignored this demand. Awami League and other opposition parties did not participate in this election. BNP came to power again without any opposition party on the 15th February 1996. However, all political groups, elite communities, and international organizations did not recognize this election as legitimate. Several days later, the BNP restructured the constitution for the caretaker government and decided to resign from the House of Parliament. The civil society in this state has

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evolved over a long period to represent the people and has served as a sentinel of freedom and human rights to a significant extent (Zafrullah, 2002). Although some have argued that the election results did not reflect a shift in voter sentiment away from Islamic affiliation, others have argued that they were the result of an "unholy alliance" between the secular Awami League and the Islamist Jamaat against the then-governing BNP government (Khan, 1992). Sheikh Hasina, the chief of the Awami League, covered the head to represent Islam in all political gatherings, to make people understand that they are not anti-Muslim (Khan, 1992). According to Khan, "during the early nineties, the AL's secular claims became much more muted, perhaps as an answer to the 1991 electoral results" (Khan, 1992). Khan also argues in this point, "by this stage it had become difficult to identify any important issues of concrete political practice affecting secularism on which the major parties differed" (Khan, 1992).

### **Election in 2001**

In 1999, the BNP formed a strategic alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Jatiya Party, and Islami Oikya to fight for the next election. The Awami League said that this coalition is hostile to our independence and statehood. Sheikh Hasina, leader of AL, stated that the opposition coalition was a gathering of "anti-liberation groups" that wanted to undermine peace and transform Bangladesh back into the former Pakistani region of East Pakistan (Rashiduzzaman, 2001). Before the election, the Awami League started again to claim that this alliance is an orthodox group, they want to make Bangladesh a Talebani state. In its statement, the AL claimed that a win for the BNP and its Islamic-party allies would result in the Talibanization of the country (Scaffer, 2002). The BNP coalition and the Awami League engaged in a religious and territorial identity struggle against one another. The BNP, on the other hand, used the anti-Indian card, a strategy that it has utilized in past elections. The Bangladesh National Party (BNP) alleged that Hasina's administration had sold Bangladesh's interests to the government in New Delhi. The BNP and its coalition gained 218 seats, while the Awami League secured 62 seats (Scaffer, 2002).

### **Election result in Bangladesh, 2001**

|     |                       |            |
|-----|-----------------------|------------|
| BNP | Seats                 | 193        |
|     | Vote Share            | 40.97%     |
|     | ( a) Total vote       | 22,833,978 |
|     | ( b )Votes by winners | 19,340,868 |
|     | ( b)÷( a)             | 84.70%     |

|                 |                        |            |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------|
| Awami League    | Seats                  | 62         |
|                 | Vote Share             | 40.13%     |
|                 | ( a ) Total vote       | 22,365,516 |
|                 | ( b ) Votes by winners | 5,629,640  |
|                 | ( b )÷( a )            | 25.17%     |
| Jamaat-E-Islami | Seats                  | 17         |
|                 | Vote Share             | 4.28%      |
|                 | ( a ) Total vote       | 2,385,361  |
|                 | ( b ) Votes by winners | 1,757,506  |
|                 | ( b )÷( a )            | 73.67%     |
| Jatiya Party    | Seats                  | 14         |
|                 | Vote Share             | 7.25%      |
|                 | ( a ) Total vote       | 4,038,453  |
|                 | ( b ) Votes by winners | 1,265,111  |
|                 | ( b )÷( a )            | 31.32%     |

*Source: Bangladesh Election Commission*

### **Election in 2008**

In 2006, the liberal Awami League formed a 14-party coalition that included Khelafat-e Majlish, an extreme conservative party that was completely extreme. It was done to demonstrate that they were not anti-Islamic and that the continuing campaign against them was unfounded and unjustified. The Awami League stated in its election campaign that they would not impose any laws that might conflict with the Quran as well as Hadith, which is the oral tradition of the last prophet of Islam (Election Manifesto, 2008). At the same time, the AL promised in the 2008 election manifesto 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” (Election Manifesto, 2008). In this election, the BNP and its coalition made religion a central theme. Bhardwaj writes, “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” (Bhardwaj, p.22). The Awami League wanted to demonstrate that they are opposed to the BNP coalition because of its anti-liberation and Bengali nationalist sentiments. In this election, the Awami League coalition gained 262 seats, while the BNP alliance obtained just 32 seats. Bangladeshi people have once again chosen Bengali Nationalism and Secularism over Islamic and Bangladeshi nationalism in the country's elections.

**Election result in Bangladesh, 2008**

|  |                        |
|--|------------------------|
| The number of people who have registered to vote | 81'083'933             |
| Valid votes                                      | 70'012'191             |
| Blank or invalid ballot papers                   | 635'317                |
| Custin Votes                                     | 70'647'508<br>(87.13%) |
| AL   | 230                    |
| BNP  | 30                     |
| Jatiya Party                                     | 27                     |
| Bangladesh Jatiya Party                          | 1                      |
| Bangladesh Workers Party                         | 2                      |
| Liberal Democratic Party                         | 1                      |
| Jatiya Samajtantric Dal-Jasad                    | 3                      |
| Independents                                     | 4                      |
| Bangladesh Jamaat-E-Islami                       | 2                      |

*Source: Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad website*

**Conclusion**

In Bangladesh's political debate, religion appears to be one of the most strong contributing elements. At least for the time being, religious propaganda has predominated in Bangladesh's political environment. Even though Bangladesh took its first steps after the Liberation War with secular values as one of the primary basic values, the armed forces dictators, after defying the ideals, incorporated religion as one of the country's most powerful ideals, resulting in the country's secularist character being shattered. It seems that the people of Bangladesh are still perplexed about their own identity. One school of thought holds that Bengali identity is founded on ethnicity, language, and secularism. Another school of thought holds that Bangladeshi identity is based on the religion and territorial identity of Bangladesh. There is no practice of ideology among these political parties, and this is significant. In order to win in every election, both the BNP and the Awami League have revised their ideologies to achieve victory.

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