Between the Secular and the Sacred: The Changing Role of Political Islam in Bangladesh

Anders C. Härdig and Tazreena Sajjad
School of International Service, American University

Since the 2013 Shahbag mobilization, and the subsequent Islamist counter mobilization known as the "Hefazat movement," Bangladesh has seen an escalation of deadly attacks on secular activists by Islamist groups. In 2015, three foreign nationals and the country's Shiite community were targeted in five separate incidents with fatal consequences. Throughout this period, members of Bangladesh's vibrant civil society, including publishers, bloggers, and media personnel, continued to receive death threats. Thus far, the Awami League (AL)-led government has continued to insist that the opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Islamist *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JI), are responsible for the violence that currently characterizes the political climate in the country. To most observers, these incidents are evidence to the rise of radical Islamists in Bangladesh over the past few decades.[1] Moreover, because the Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for the attacks on foreign nationals and the Shiite population, questions have also been raised regarding the presence of international terrorist networks in Bangladesh. While there is now literature on the emergence of militant Islam in the country, what remains underexamined is the broader shifts in Bangladeshi society and the subsequent radicalization unfolding within a context of a strengthened role of political Islam. In other words, Islam has become political where it was previously predominantly cultural.[2] Moreover, the targeting of Sufi preachers and religious minorities suggest that the current situation is not merely a matter of "the secular versus the sacred," but that there is a particular *interpretation* of "the sacred" versus those who diverge from that interpretation.

In this paper, we explore the question: What explains the recent rise in political violence in Bangladesh? The recent surge of violence is taking place against the backdrop of a fast growing economy. While a rise in GNP certainly does not directly translate into economic well-being for all, the simple equation of "rise in poverty equals rise in radicalism" does not hold true in Bangladesh's case.[3] Moreover, Bangladesh has a highly sophisticated civil society, a population that strongly believes in capitalism (and thinks highly of the United States – according to a 2014 poll, 76% viewed the US favorably[4]), and a strong religio-cultural tradition grounded in a secular political platform.[5] We argue that the rise in political violence employed by Islamist actors is

[1] This issue became particularly interesting to scholars and policymakers after the September 11 attacks in 2001. See, for instance, K. A. Kronstadt and Bruce Vaughn, "Terrorism in South Asia," Report to the United States Congress, (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 13 December 2004).

[2] Francis Robinson, "Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, No.2-3 (March 2008): 259-281.

[3] Md Fazlur Rahman, "Bangladesh close to mid-income status," *The Daily Star*, May 15, 2015.

[4] Spring 2014 Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research Center, July 2014.

[5] According to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, 80 percent of Bangladeshis support a free market economy. http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/09/emerging-and-developing-economies-much-more-optimistic-than-rich-countries-about-the-future/ (Accessed November 12, 2015).

enabled by a broader shift in how Islam functions in Bangladeshi society and a political context of complex hyperpolarization, where political violence has become an accepted tactic.[6] In order to understand this current trend, we first need to examine the permissive environment – the context, which legitimizes and encourages violence as a political tactic and silences critics and opponents. It is critical to emphasize that our argument is not that Bangladeshi society as a whole is becoming "radicalized," but rather that the shift of the role of Islam in Bangladeshi society, combined with a stifling political deadlock between the two major political parties, makes it difficult to mount an effective counter discourse to reaffirm the unique secular and Muslim identity of Bangladesh. Consequently, the vast majority of Bangladeshis are held hostage by a small number of domestic violent networks, some of whom have linked up to global dynamics of transnational Islamist activism.

The Politicization of Islam in Bangladesh

Historically, political secularism and Islam have not been understood as dichotomous in the South Asian region. Both Pakistan and Bangladesh were founded on secular principles and both have experienced a significant increase in the potency of political Islam as a mobilizing force in recent years. On the cultural level, observers have noted an "Arabization" of Islam in South Asia during the same time period.[7] Anecdotal evidence supports the notion that such a process is happening – and in highly visible ways. For instance, there has been a shift in every day language relating to common religious practices such as the change from the use of the word "Ramzan" to "Ramadan;" saying "Allah Hafiz" instead of the previously common "Khuda Hafiz;" and there is a general vilification of local practices of Islam as being "contaminated" by "ignorant" cultural traditions. Informal conversations often reveal a desire among a younger generation, particularly urbanites, to learn about "true Islam," as if the religious teachings they grew up with were tainted by Bengali cultural traditions and "improper" Iranian influences. Arguably, by following an allegedly more "pure" version of Islam, they are at once consumers and co-producers of an Arabized Islam, very different from the Sufi traditions that shaped Bengali culture for centuries.

That this new Islamic identity is taking hold in at least some segments of society was evident in the effectiveness of the Islamists casting Shahbag protesters in 2013 as "atheists" and their agenda being "anti-Islam," successfully conflating three concepts: secularism, atheism, and anti-Islamism. In the new "post-secular" Bangladesh, Islamists can find enough resonance for this kind of messaging to put pressure on the government, mount a massive march on the capital, silence those who diverge from their interpretation of Islam and secularism, and derail the largest secular popular mobilization in recent history.[8] Arguably, three key mutually perpetuating factors have contributed to this shift: domestic political dynamics (state-sanctioned decisions since 1975 saw the gradual opening for Islamists in politics); global/regional political polarization (public opposition to the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, and

---

[6] For an in-depth discussion on the concept of "complex hyperpolarization," see, Tazreena Sajjad and Anders Härdig, "Too Many Enemies: Mobilization, Marginalization, and Political Violence," forthcoming 2016 in *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

[7] See, for instance, Taj Hashmi, "Arabisation of Bangladesh: An Asset, Liability or Threat?" *The Daily Star*, July 14, 2015, http://www.thedailystar.net/op-ed/arabisation-bangladesh-112009 (Accessed October 29, 2015)

[8] Sajjad and Härdig, forthcoming 2016.

the resurgence of transnational Islamist movements in their wake); and the proliferation of Salafist or Salafist-inspired interpretations of Islam.[9] This last factor is likely the least studied since it is both difficult to measure the impact of particular discourses in a conventional social science research design, and because the significance of discourse is frequently underestimated in political science studies. On the contrary, we argue, discourse is crucial in setting the parameters for what is thinkable and unthinkable in any given context; in Bangladesh, it has had a critical role in *mobilizing* and *amplifying* certain actors and narratives, while systematically *delegitimizing* and *silencing* others. We have identified a number of key transmitters of Islamist discourse. Traditional and social media are obvious venues – the proliferation of TV channels, international religious programs and Islamic televangelists contribute to the dissemination of a particular discourse on Islam and its role in society. However, mosques and madrassahs remain important transmitters of discourse on Islam in Bangladesh and, we argue, are key actors in the current campaign to "reform" and "purify" Islam in the country.

Madrassahs in Bangladesh

Although madrassahs have existed in Bangladesh for centuries, they have increasingly become important nodes of socialization and transmitters of particular interpretations of Islam since the late 1980s, suggesting that there is something distinct about the type of madrassahs that have proliferated in recent decades.[10] Moreover, madrassahs are incredibly diverse – they do not all subscribe to the same interpretations of Islam, nor do they necessarily agree on all social and political issues. What many of them do agree on, however, are a number of basic mobilizing "frames" (i.e. a diagnosis of a societal problem and prescription for a solution) and the overarching sense that "Islam is under attack" by secular forces. Indeed, considering the central role of madrassahs in the 2013 Hefazat mobilization, and because the strains of political Islam that are now becoming prominent in Bangladesh share many doctrinal similarities with Salafist teachings, madrassahs with direct financial and doctrinal ties to the Arabian Peninsula are often singled out as being more likely to promote a political activist agenda.[11] However, our research suggests that the proliferation of new Islamist mobilizing frames cuts across theological schools of thought and is at this point not limited to madrassahs of any particular orientation.

Madrassahs in Bangladesh can be roughly divided into two types; *Aliya* and *Qawmi*.[12] *Aliya* madrassahs, while privately owned and run, receive support from the government and are

---

[9] The term "Salafist" is admittedly problematic, because many Islamists who are labeled Salafists do not self-identify as such and the nuances in doctrine and theology are inescapably brushed over. For our purposes, however, the term is used to capture a movement to purify Islam in Bangladesh and a return to a "true Islam," which is fundamentally what the Salafist movement aims to do.

[10] See, for instance, Ali Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Jessica Stern, "Preparing for a War on Terrorism," *Current History* 100, No. 649 (2001): 355-357; Alan Richards "At War with Utopian Fanatics," *Middle East Policy* 8, no. 4 (2001). For less alarmist studies of South Asian madrassahs, see Jamal Malik (ed.) *Madrasas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?* (New York: Routledge, 2008) and Alexander Evans, "Understanding Madrasahs: How Threatening Are They," *Foreign Affairs* 85, No. 9 (2006).

[11] The sources of madrassah funding are impossible to fully map, but it is known that a significant number of madrassahs receive funding from Gulf states, usually through various Islamic charities and NGOs. Some of our interviewees even went so far as to claim that there is a conscious effort on the part of Arab actors to speed up the "Arabization" of Islam in Bangladesh in the wake of Shahbag.

[12] The total number of *Qawmi* madrassahs in Bangladesh is unknown. Estimates range between 4,000 and 48,000, but many estimates place them between 15,000 and 20,000. *Aliya* madrassahs are registered with the government

required to follow a government approved curriculum, which includes "modern" subjects, such as natural sciences and computer science. The government accredits *Aliya* madrassah degrees; hence students can transfer into the secular higher education system, and qualify for public employment. *Qawmi* madrassahs are not overseen by any government entity. Its students do not receive degrees accredited by the government and consequently face limited career opportunities once their education is complete. As a result, *Qawmi* madrassah students are more likely to take up religious positions in mosques and madrassahs once they graduate.

The *Aliya-Qawmi* madrassah distinction is neither theological or ideological – there is diversity also within the *Aliya* and *Qawmi* systems, although the most prominent *Qawmi* madrassahs follow the Deobandi tradition, which in some parts of the Indian subcontinent is heavily influenced by Wahhabism.[13] *Aliya* madrassahs, in theory, have less freedom in promoting interpretations of Islam that run counter to that of the Bangladeshi state identity. However, our review of *Aliya* madrassah curricula, as well as the interview and focus group data on the reaction of madrassah teachers to Sufi elements, suggest that the "purification campaign," which may have originated among the unregulated madrassahs funded by foreign actors, is not limited to *Qawmi* madrassas. The most dramatic indication of this is the revelation that several *Aliya* madrassahs have replaced the first pillar of Islam, *shahada* (faith, testimony), with *jihad*, which is not one of the five pillars of Islam, in their curricula. Furthermore, a certain degree of discomfort was demonstrated by many *Aliya* madrassah teachers with the *milad*,[14] claiming such a practice was "un-Islamic" and a Sufi remnant that should be purged from the "true" practice of Islam.[15] This kind of rejection of Bengali/South Asian cultural practices distinguishes the traditional way Islam has functioned in Bangladeshi society from modern Salafi-inspired expressions of faith and creates a greater identity crisis for Bangladeshis. While the Bengali vs. Muslim identity crisis is not entirely new, the increase in this kind of scrutiny of traditional Bengali Muslim practices is testament to how such a dynamic has accelerated in recent decades.

Generally, *Qawmi* madrassahs reject political party activism through the existing political system, but semantics become highly significant here. They employ a very narrow interpretation of the term "political activism" to imply political *party* activism. This type of rejection of political activism aligns with certain transnational Islamist movement frames; the JI are themselves subject to denouncement from global jihadist actors, such as IS, which has declared JI's leader a "*Murtad*" (apostate) and calls their participation in the political structure "un-Islamic."[16] The political potency of the *Qawmi* madrassahs was clearly demonstrated during the 2013 Hefazat mobilization against the secular Shahbag mobilization, which had demanded the

---

and the most recent data (2012) puts that number at 9,441 private and three public (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information & Statistics).

[13] As with the labels "Salafi" and "Wahhabi," the label "Deobandi" is fraught with problems. Much like the Salafi/Wahhabi movement, the Deobandi movement represents an effort to reform and "purify" Islam, although generally Deobandis place more emphasis on the doctrine of *Taqlid*, and its followers tend to be of the Hanafi *Madhhab* (school), claiming that Imam Abu Hanifa represents the "true" interpretation of the Quran and Hadith.

[14] A traditional religious cultural practice where families and friends gather for communal prayers and *hamds* and *naats* (hymns in praise of Allah and Prophet Muhammed) for religious holidays, to celebrate births, new beginnings and on the occasion of deaths.

[15] This sentiment was expressed in several interviews and in focus groups with *Aliya* madrassah teachers from across the country in July 2015.

[16] Arafatul Islam, "Bangladesh ignores Islamic State's threats," Deutsche Welle, November 27, 2015, Available at http://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-ignores-islamic-states-threat/a-18880275 (Accessed November 28, 2015).

capital punishment for collaborators who had committed war crimes against the Bengali population in the 1971 war; the banning of religious-based political parties; and the banning of all social, economic, and cultural organizations affiliated with the JI.[17] The 13 point demand of the Hefazat listed, among other things, the abolishment of the inheritance law and the education policy which recognized equal rights of women, declaration of the *Ahmadiyyah* as non-Muslims, death penalty for the defamation of Islam and for "atheist" bloggers, and the establishment of *Shari'a* as the law of the land.[18] As was evident in the *Hefazat* mobilization, *Aliya* and *Qawmi* students can be mobilized for the same ends, particularly when the JI and informal Islamist networks have common objectives.

Political Islam and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB)

The GoB under different administrations has strategically accommodated Islamists, particularly since the late 1970s. Consequently, the Bengali secular identity has repeatedly been under siege as successive military dictatorships and democratic regimes changed the Constitution, introduced religious studies in mainstream education, and expanded the *Aliya* system to include more private madrassahs.[19] Since the return of democracy in 1990, Islamists, particularly the JI, have been courted by both AL and, to a greater extent, the BNP for strategic purposes.

The current government has been under tremendous pressure to respond to secularists' demands to challenge JI, but Hefazat's visibly strong backlash has instead resulted, some would argue, in the government pandering to several of the Islamists' demands. For instance, consider the amendment of the 2006 Information Communication Technology Act in 2013, which has expanded the government's ability to crack down on those who "hurt religious beliefs" and for "acts of defamation."[20] Several bloggers, journalists and other private citizens have been arrested under this act, creating a situation where the government appears to be more keen on appeasing the Islamists than protecting the country's democratic platform. While the current administration has taken some serious measures against Islamist militant outfits, in response to the recent targeting of the blogger community the GoB has been reluctant to publicly condemn these killings. In a Reuters interview in 2015, the son and advisor to the PM Sheikh Hasina acknowledged that the AL government is wary of being labeled as an "atheist" by opponents and therefore cannot publicly condemn the targeting of bloggers.[21] Despite the grim prognosis about both the political will and the capacity of the GoB to contain the current strain of political Islam, our research nevertheless indicates a quiet but serious understanding of the potential impact of political Islamist doctrine on *Aliya* madrassahs. Consequently, there are efforts underway to reform the system with the significance of discourse in mind:

---

[17] Nayma Qayum, "Shahbag: Religion and Politics in Dhaka's Public Square," *The Revealer,* October 9, 2013, Available at http://therevealer.org/archives/18524 (Accessed October 15, 2013).

[18] The 13 point demand of Hefazat-e-Islami, *Kagoj,* Available at http://www.kaagoj.com/details?id=139 (Accessed October 23, 2015).

[19] Dina M. Siddiqi, "Political Culture in Contemporary Bangladesh: Histories, Ruptures and Contradictions," in *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*, eds Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair, Routledge, 2011.

[20] Briefing Paper on the amendments to the Bangladesh Information Communication Technology Act 2006, *International Committee of Jurists*, November 2013.

[21] John Shiffman, "Exclusive: Widow of slain U.S.-Bangladeshi blogger lashes out at Dhaka," Reuters, May 11, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/11/us-usa-bangladesh-assassination-exclusiv-idUSKBN0NW04S20150511#XUcmbjmEgQMU1OgF.97

(i)   *Civic identity in the madrassah curriculum*: Working with local actors outside of the madrassah system, the GoB supports courses and lectures on the Liberation War and the modern history of Bangladesh, where students are encouraged to discuss and engage in question and answer sessions, a platform that generally does not exist in the madrassah education system. In addition, our research indicated that the ruling party is making some inroads into student politics through its student union, but JI still dominates among students and teachers, at least among teachers of Islamic subjects.

(ii)   *The inclusion of minorities:* While there are as of yet no non-Muslim students enrolled in any *Aliya* madrassah, the government has already removed the restriction on *Aliya* madrassahs to only accept Muslim students and there are now Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist teachers among the faculty. For such students, Islamic subjects would be voluntary and the idea might appeal to those who cannot afford mainstream education. However, these measures may meet with resistance among the more fundamentalist elements, particularly teachers of Islamic subjects.

(iii)   *Broadening the madrassah curriculum*: To further counter the strength of political Islam in the *Aliya* madrassahs, the government is trying to increase the number of mainstream subjects, such as natural and social sciences, math, and computer science.

(iv)   *Further increase the number of women:* Due to fiscal incentives in the 1990s, *Aliya* madrassahs already have a significant number of female students (close to 50% on the secondary level) and there are both all-female and co-ed madrassahs. However, the faculty is still male dominated and the government wants to further increase the number of female teachers.

(v)   *Diversifying the faculty body*: While currently the rules state that the principal and vice principal of an *Aliya* madrassah must be competent in Islamic subjects the current GoB aims to remove this rule, thus allowing for "moderate" and liberal principals to run *Aliya* madrassahs. However, even today the principals and vice principals in *Aliya* madrassahs do not have the same power *Qawmi* principals do – the former are overseen by a board and do not have the sway over students as is the case in the latter system. Thus, *Aliya* students will not heed a call from the principal to join a mobilization (if they dared risk their jobs by making such a request), whereas such a call from a *Qawmi* principal would be abided by 100% of *Qawmi* students. Nevertheless, it is likely many *Aliya* students do take part in specific mobilizations on an individual basis, since the majority of them are affiliated with JI.

The feasibility and final outcomes of these measures are uncertain, but they do indicate that the government recognizes that madrassahs in Bangladesh are important sites of socialization and identity formation. However, the possibility that the *Qawmi* sector is significantly larger than the *Aliya* sector (although this is disputed by some), the fact that *Qawmi* madrassahs students are more likely than their *Aliya* peers to enter the religious establishment in mosques around the country, combined with the recent failures of bringing *Qawmi* madrassahs in under government

oversight, also means that the key transmitters of Islamist discourse may well be beyond the reach of the state.

Conclusion
On the surface, Bangladesh is an unlikely growing ground for radical Islamist groups. Founded on secular principles, it has been heralded by the western world as an example of a model Muslim country, while its people have taken great pride in its unique syncretic nature, which has generated a largely tolerant Bengali entity. Political Islam in response to British colonialism and modernization also carved a space for itself in this rich tapestry. However, this has specific implications given Bangladesh's violent birth from Pakistan; JI's active role in opposing its independence; and the measures taken under periods of military and democratic rule to allow for its specific strains to enter mainstream politics. These complex dynamics, exacerbated by deep tensions between the political parties, have resulted in an inevitable collision of the various aspects of the Bangladeshi identity – Bengali/secular/Bangladeshi/Muslim – and a contemporary competition for legitimacy and primacy over the reins of the state.

The current context is defined by a climate of hyperpolarization where violence as a political tactic is not unique to Islamist parties and groups, but is being used increasingly to silence dissent. Crucially, for Islamists, a new discourse on Islam has taken hold in certain segments of Bangladeshi society, enabling them to link their cause to popular imaginings of what it means to be "Muslim." This discourse, distinct from traditional understandings of Islam in Bangladesh, also ensures that the rallying call of "Islam is under attack" appeals to a broader audience beyond narrow theological strains, and that the "secularism equals atheism equals anti-Islamism" frame is effective in delegitimizing (and dehumanizing) outspoken secularists.

Arguably, a significant source of this discourse is the proliferation of private *Qawmi* madrassahs, some funded and inspired by Islamist actors in the Gulf, the doctrines of which have influenced the broader society through their output of students into the religious establishment, and which appear to have had an impact on government-overseen *Aliya* madrassah curricula as well. Madrassahs are certainly not the only transmitters of this discourse on Islam. Indeed, returning migrant laborers from the Arabian Peninsula, the proliferation of social and traditional media, and global and regional political dynamics are all potential and probable co-producers.

In the face of the current challenges, the government has demonstrated ambivalence – on the one hand it has taken laudable measures in countering Islamic militancy and pushed for the War Crimes Tribunal where the majority of defendants come from the Islamist ranks, but on the other hand it has restricted freedom of expression. However, understanding the recent rise in Islamist political violence as evidence of the "radicalization" of Bangladeshi society both oversimplifies and obscures the much more complex dynamics under the surface. While the government should be encouraged to take strong measures against Islamic militancy as well as other forms of political violence, in the long-run, what is needed is a strong counter-discourse to the emerging Salafi-inspired identity and new notions of political Islam. In that effort, madrassahs can be an important venue to produce an understanding of an Islam that is perfectly compatible with secularism, freedom of expression, and democracy.