

Secularism in Bangladesh: A Paradox?

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Abstract

As interim PM Prof Yusuf was sworn in, PM Modi was among the first few to receive a phone call as the new PM gave assurances that the safety of the Hindu and other minorities shall remain a priority for the new Bangladesh, after the fall of Sheikh Hasina earlier this month. However, this begs the question, as to why the kerfuffle regarding the threat to Hindu minorities was on the rise in the first place, following the hastened departure of the former PM as student revolutionaries took over Ganabhaban. This paper seeks to understand how secularism in Bangladesh has panned out over the years.

Keywords: Secularism, Bangladesh, Political Islam, Bengali Nationalism, Religious Minorities

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a country of contradictions. When Awami League leader SK Mujibur Rahman won the country's independence, the basis for separation was clear—founded on language and cultural identity rather than Islamic identity. The Awami League particularly won the hearts of the people because it represented not only Bangladeshi interests but also emphasized minority communities, especially Hindus. It was envisioned as an egalitarian, secular state built on the pillars of Bengali nationalism (Guhathakurta, 2012). However, the ideals of secularism have faced challenges from the rising influence of political Islam and sectarian tensions, often portraying Islamic identity as opposing Bengali nationalism and secular governance (Absar, 2014). This situation worsened with the constitutional declaration of Islam as the state religion in 2011, leading many to believe it revoked the secularist ideals encouraged at the country's founding, fueling religiously motivated political agendas and trends of exclusion for religious minorities (Absar, 2014). Bangladesh's secular ideology can be traced back to the anti-colonial movement and the Bengali language movement of the 1950s, which unified Bengalis in the fight for linguistic and cultural recognition (Absar, 2014).

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It was, therefore a turning point in the country's history as it formed a war of liberation during 1971 to liberate Bangladesh from religious nationalism that had underpinned the united Pakistan and form an independent secular nation.

2. Challenges to Maintaining Secular Principles

Over time after achieving independence, the early-year promises of secularism gradually lost ground and eventually paved the way as political parties and religious groups began focusing more on regaining their influence and gradually introducing the influence of Islam into governance as well as social life. During the 1970s, dictatorships in Bangladesh adopted the device of using Islamic rhetoric and symbols to strengthen their positions toward legitimacy and consolidation. This was a long way from the country's founding principles as a secular nation-state by Mujibur Rahman. (Hasan, 2012).

3. Secularism and National Identity

Further fueling this process was the rise of global Islamist movements and the expanding role of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which began to provide financial and ideological support for a variety of Islamist groups in Bangladesh.

Islamic political movements began to resurge once again with the coming of the post-Bangladesh identity crisis along with an influx of Arab oil wealth. Thus, the initial cradle of robust Bengali nationalism defining Bangladesh's national identity gradually made way for a religiously-influenced "Bangladeshi" nationalism increasingly positioning Islam at the center of the country's consciousness (Hasan, 2012). It's set the pattern for this ceaseless tug-of-war in which the two dominant parties, the Awami League, which has nurtured secular Bengali nationalism, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have historically identified with Islamist outfits and sought to affirm its more religiously-grounded national identity.

This fight has important implications for what has happened to religious minorities in Bangladesh. This has tended to mean the protection of rights and security for Hindus, Buddhists, and other small minorities during the rule of the Awami League, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party embracing Islamism has often strengthened the trend toward increased persecution and marginalization of them. In recent years, violence, discrimination, and forced conversions against Hindu, Christian, and other minorities have increased during the BNP regimes, as Islamist factions attempted to push for a more prominent role of Islam in the social and political life of the country. This situation has led to insecurity and vulnerability among many of the country's minority citizens and challenges the founding vision of Bangladesh as an egalitarian, inclusive state.

Thus, the struggle between these two groups is a very important determinant of the future status and treatment of religious minorities in the country. More than that, while formally all Bangladeshi political parties are secular, none of them wishes to lose the Islamic votes that make up a considerable part of the electorate. And Islamist votes count too.

This is why, as the world mourns, right and left act very warily towards radical Muslims, even ambiguously at times, despite their official declarations. It is for this

reason that many are afraid that the image of Bangladesh as a tolerant country, proudly upheld in official speeches, is wavering.

4. Media Narratives and the Perpetuation of Stereotypes

The marginalization of Religious minorities, which include Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and other smaller faith groups, has usually been relegated to the periphery in political and social discourses about secularism. They have had to balance their need to assert their rights and identities with the complex dynamics of a state that has increasingly privileged Islamic identity and influence. Many of these communities are concerned about the erosion of secularist principles and growing public incarnations of religious nationalism. They have been vocal in demanding the re-establishment and strengthening of secular governance because it is meant to protect their rights, preserve their respective cultural and religious practices, and foster an egalitarian and inclusive society.

Minority perspectives on secularism are diverse and reflect their unique historical experiences, cultural traditions, and socio-political contexts. Some minority groups have called for a more activist and inclusive form of secularism that actively promotes and accommodates the country's religious diversity, whereas others have emphasized the need to maintain a strong distinction between religion and state to ensure equal treatment of all citizens. In any event, it is the voices and experiences of religious minorities themselves that will shape the ongoing discourse on secularism in Bangladesh. Their views, therefore, are useful in understanding the stringent challenges and opportunities of staying pluralistic and truly inclusive, and for that engagement, this dialogue is truly fundamental to the realization of the founding principles of this land of secularism and equality.

5. Conclusion

Northeast Bangladesh has a new ground to cover: going that distance in its state and political discourses and thinking about restructuring its ideological constructs. It could learn from the experience of countries that have had to endure a similar trend of political development-drain, like Turkey, Indonesia, and India, which were all struggling to find the right tone between secularism and religious influences on governance.

One such measure could be further strengthening the institutional and legal framework-sustaining the secular foundation of the state. This may include going into the constitutional recognition of Islam as the state religion and reaffirming principles of equality rights and non-discrimination for all citizens. Bangladesh could also think of enhancing the role of civil society and independent media as key players in safeguarding the secular identity of the country and in promoting narratives that are inclusive and pluralistic.

Furthermore, Bangladeshi political parties might get better focused on more constructive and nuanced dialogue concerning the role of religion in public life, finding a common point and compromise between the competing visions of secularism and religious nationalism. This could involve the cultural-historical significance Islam has in Bangladeshi society while at the same time upholding the

fundamental rights of religious minorities and corresponding between state and religion.

In the end, it will require the multidimensionality of the approach in taming the political Islam and religiosity in Bangladesh. It requires an understanding of what goes political and ideological regarding this challenge. Learning from other experiences and embarking on a critical self-reflection and rethinking process will take Bangladesh far along this path.

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