



## International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

# Transformation of Linguistic Identity to Religious Identity: An Exploration of the Political Transition in Bangladesh

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### Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (SJIF): 6.876

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

[www.alladvancejournal.com](http://www.alladvancejournal.com)

Received: 04/Nov/2025

Accepted: 05/Dec/2025

### Abstract

The political development of Bangladesh then provides a very interesting story of the shift in the consciousness of the language-oriented nationalism into nationalism that is becoming much more based on religious aspects. In this paper, the politics of identity in Bangladesh, focusing on how the initial emphasis has been on linguistic nationalism in the Liberation War in 1971, which has slowly shifted to the later years, with the development of a national identity along religious lines. A thorough historical as well as political analysis is demonstrated with factors such as the radical influence of the Bengali language in the nationalist movement, the impacts of the constitutional amendments, and the effects of domestic or world political forces on religious identity formation being major milestones of the study. The study assumes that as the linguistic identity served an important purpose in Bangladesh's road to independence, the political transition followed, the rule of the military, and the rise of religious political parties have redefined the national identity progressively to Centre on Islam. The implication of this change is serious in terms of governance, social harmony, and minority rights in Bangladesh. In exploring these shifts, the paper will help to deepen the knowledge regarding the intricacies of developing national identities in an environment of dynamically changing political realities.

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**Keywords:** Linguistic Nationalism, Religious Identity, National Identity, Military Governance, Religious Political Parties

### Introduction

#### A. The Crisis of Identity Formation: Political Conflicts and Ideological Struggles

The secession of Bangladesh in 1971 out of Pakistan was not a territorial breakup. Instead, it also explicitly disrupted the ideological premises of Pakistan by criticising the claim that the Hindu and Muslim people of India (before partition) were two separate nations. It is upon this account that the monolithic nation-state Pakistan formed in 1947 rested on the premise that the mostly Muslim regions of the sub-continent ought to be united as one nation, thus providing legal validity to a geographically large, ethnically diverse polity. The formation of Bangladesh was seen by many scholars as an accomplishment of the goals spelt out in the 1940 Resolution of Lahore, thus making the argument that the institution of Pakistan by Mohammed Iqbal was more exacting than the vision of a Muslim homeland by Mohammed Ali Jinnah. This was based upon the well-known 1930 presidential speech by

Iqbal when he mentioned Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province, Sind, and Baluchistan to be open to merging into the same state, either in the British Empire or outside the Empire. <sup>[1]</sup>

In the beginning, Bengal did not find a place in the exposition of Iqbal. It was only later, in a letter to Jinnah dated June 21, 1937, that the poet-philosopher began to show interest in the Afghan Muslim community. The author of the concept of Pakistan, Chaudhary Rahmat Ali, also excluded Bengal from his vision, referring to it as *Bang-e-Islam*, and envisioned a Muslim-majority nation independent of any Pakistan. The vision Ali envisioned was mostly the same as the one that was made in the 1930s by Iqbal, with one exception, which was Kashmir. The 1940 Lahore Resolution created a tentative compromise between the vision of Iqbal and what Jinnah and the Muslim provincial leadership in other places, like U.P., envisioned. It referred to Muslim India as one, and, in its defining term, suggested that the regions where the Muslims

form the numerical majority, such as the north-western and the eastern sections of India, will be pooled together to form the independent states, where the blocks of the continent will be autonomous and independent.<sup>[2]</sup>

It was only at the 1946 Muslim League Legislative Convention in Delhi that the League officially proposed a united state of Pakistan that included the northwestern and eastern Muslim majority areas. At that, we know that there was a dissent recorded then by Abul Hashim, secretary of the Bengal branch of the League, which was later proved right by the course of events, but the thrust of his prophecy was ignored at the time, due to the force of emotions of Jinnah's doctrine. Many researchers indicate two intellectual trends of the nineteenth century that influenced the opinion regarding the two-nation theory: the first one is Aligarh, and the second one is the Deoband seminary. Although this Aligarh strand was very Islamic, it emphasised a pragmatic, revisionist interpretation that was compatible with Islam and the liberal national state and parliamentary democracy. Based on such notions, Jinnah, on numerous occasions, would say that Islam and the state did not have to fight. In comparison, the *Deobandian* tradition propagated a medieval hierarchical vision where power had to be concentrated in the hands of the clergy, where a global manifestation of the Islamic community had to be created, and where geopolitical borders and the symbols of national identity were seen as potentially divisive. This is the reason why initially, many *Deobandian* scholars did not welcome the establishment of a Pakistani state. The Deoband tradition has led the *Jamaat-i-Islami party* and *Jamaat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam* after Independence.

All these institutions promoted various priorities and disparate policies to build an authentic Islamic society by systematically codifying *Shari'at*. Together, they supported the curbing of the religious authority based on Sunni orthodoxy, encouraged the exclusive use of Urdu, imposed strict penalties on adultery and theft, as well as supported the ideals of Islam on interest, taxes, and economic development. The middle class in East Bengal, however, soon recognised that livelihood was not just possible on religious tenets. With an economic system that permitted exploitation and a political structure that left all West Pakistan, particularly Punjab and Mohajir elites, well-endowed with power, the power structure in the new nation gravely favoured West Pakistan, and economically, it was realised that any politically sentient Bengali was conscious of being in a profound state of exclusion. These vendettas were further enflamed by geographical proximity and language differences to create a growing call to self-rule in East Pakistan. Such refutations were eventually denied by the central government.

In the newly independent Pakistan, the state resorted to launching a series of projects that were aimed at trying to strengthen its hold on the Bengali Muslims in the country. The first strategy focused on the claim that Pakistani nationality has to be governed mostly by religion. Such theorists of this school of thought would have assumed a religious identity that would take precedence over other primordial identities and hold the diverse nation together. Theoretically, one state can rally people around a single identity in its rallies, yet turning this assumption into realistic politics and empowering it against sub-national identities required an egalitarian project that could address the political aspirations and economic grievances that arise along the ethno-linguistic continuum.

This is contrary to this expectation. Jinnah had also proclaimed Urdu as the state language in the year 1948,

without putting into consideration that the Bengali Muslims were a separate sub-group whose political and social aspirations had to be acknowledged in the new Pakistan. Instead of working together with Bengali Muslim political elites in solving the emerging cultural and economic issues, the leadership of the Muslim League, acting as an agent of West Pakistan, tried out two alternatives: authoritarian redefinition of the political culture in Pakistan and prioritising a Persianised and Arabised thinking about religion and culture. The League, therefore, pushed to make Urdu the only language used in the whole country, even though Urdu was a minority language spoken by a small proportion of the rulers of the country who migrated to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and settled in Karachi.<sup>[3]</sup>

Urdu was to be made the language of education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, and the Bengali script was to transition into the Arabic script. All this can be referred to as a self-proclaimed civilising mission.<sup>[4]</sup> Such a move would have huge ramifications against Bengali educated professionals, who now had to compete in securing a government job with their counterparts in West Pakistan, who had to learn English and Urdu apart from Bengali.

Meanwhile, the hope of improved employment and a bright future was still a far-fetched dream because of the economic drain of East Pakistan to West Pakistan. An Adult Education Centre had been founded by the government, and large sums were provided to teach education in Bengali through the Arabic Script. At the same time, an attempt was made to influence Bengali Muslim writers to write in *Chalit Bhasa*, to rid Bengali literature of the influence of the so-called *Sanskritised* words. By April 1951, the government had incurred a cost of approximately Rs60,000 in an attempt to investigate whether it was possible to make people literate in a very short period and through the adoption of an Arabic script.<sup>[5]</sup>

The violent repression of the Language Movement by the government on 21st February 1952 renewed the Bengali cultural nationalistic sentiments. Since the middle of the 1950s, it was the secular and democratic movements that found the voice of their discontent with the status quo, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The minority communities in Pakistan, which comprised 10 per cent of the entire population, were also becoming a strong opposing voice, as they wished to have a voice in the national politics, too. This issue was taken up by the Awami League (AL), which by then had gained a following, along with the policy of language. In 1955, the secular forces in the AL repealed an earlier directive of their party so that it now also embraced all Pakistan citizens regardless of their creed, caste, and religion. Then the party was renamed to National Awami League (previously Awami Muslim League). Having the main communities as grassroots support, the AL became a mass political party. It was to be the original political party to achieve a breakthrough in communal politics in the State.

Economic deprivation was the most salient issue affecting the people of East Pakistan, which had been further escalated by the discrimination of the government in allocating resources to the West wing and the East wing. The policies of West Pakistan had resulted in creating imbalances in the economy of the two wings of Pakistan, and the economy of West Pakistan had increased faster than the economy of East Pakistan between 1949-50 and 1969-70. On the one hand, East Pakistan exported its raw jute and jute articles, making up more than 90 per cent of the total export earnings of Pakistan; and on the other hand, it supplied its raw jute and

jute goods for the foreign exchange earnings. However, West Pakistan was taking the major part of the foreign exchange to spend on investment and industrialisation. It was in an attempt to resolve this economic mismatch between the two wings that the Six Point Programme, which was a famous exercise, was launched.<sup>[6]</sup> The Bengali commitment to Pakistan was based on the assumption that they would practice autonomous politics on the regional level and share power on the federal level; however, they were betrayed virtually at the outset of the new Pakistan. Within a highly centralised system, the power was in the hands of the elite of West Pakistan. This elite exploited its influence to strip East Bengal of resources, hoarding external aid, and redirecting the state resources to West Pakistan, in an allegedly designed social equality creating programme. But such a programme required the repression of democracy and the refusal of autonomy to the provinces, and East Pakistan specifically. The stress on religious identity served as a mask behind which lay the Punjab-centric identity of the new Pakistani state. These struggles to have democracy, regional autonomy, social justice, secularism, and nationalism intertwined in the larger struggle to have self-rule in East Pakistan. The establishment of the national identity of Bangladesh must then be seen in the historical perspectives that saw the creation of an independent state.

### **B. Challenging Identities in the New State of Bangladesh**

Programme and policies of Fazlul Haq in undivided India and then H.S. Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhashani, Mujibur Rahman, and Ziaur Rahman, all of whom, in turn, were critical in shaping Bengali Muslim politics. The roots of the concept of Bangladesh were in a series of conflicts related to identity issues. The first of these struggles, as represented by religious identities, initially resulted in the division of East Bengal as a province of the Indian body politic. The second war coincided with the regime of East Pakistan in terms of its political, linguistic, and cultural identity, and led to the further split of Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. These identities were further shaped during the 1980s and 1990s and continue to evolve in the contemporary period, particularly after August 2024, by the continuities of differences of perception and ideology among Bangladeshi leaders.

The evaporation of the so-called second colonial rulers, who had tried to fuse the fractious communities of Pakistan into a nation, revealed the significance of primordial cultural-linguistic identities. Mujib continued to unite the new country by his four pillars: democracy, socialism, secularism, and Bengali nationalism, the fundamental philosophy of the freedom struggle in Bangladesh. In comparison, the narrower policy views of anti-Mujib leaders such as Maulana Bhasani and General Ziaur Rahman (who had overthrown Mujib in a coup in 1975) were concerned with another form of nationalism that had Islam as its centre. The policies of Bhasani were premised on the ideas of even Islamic socialism, and during one of his meetings, he proclaimed that he would indeed 'trample the Constitution underfoot, unless it is based on *Quran* and practices of the *Prophet*'<sup>[7]</sup>

He espoused a sectarian type of communalism, founded on an anti-Hindu spirit much more like that in the concept of Pakistan, as opposed to the policies of secularism held by the Mujib administration. He accused Mujib of turning Bangladesh into an Indian satellite, trying to create a united front of 'extremists of right and left against the powers of secularism. Discussion over the separation of state and religion took place in 1972 when the Bangladesh Constitution of the same year asserted that secularism was the fourth pillar

of state policy. The concept of integrating secularism in state policy was a logical extension of the freedom movement, where Bengalis strived to create a democratic nation with secular ideals.

The key power of a secular society is that it minimises the role of primordial aspects of religion, ethnicity, and caste in the national identity-making process, which shapes political preference and outlines economic choices. Any such primordial factor elevated to such a level of reflection that it limits opportunity or provokes violence is unfriendly to the building of a secular society. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman meant this definition of secularism very specifically. To him, secularism did not mean the absence of religion or repudiation of Islam. He claimed that it was a method of defending individuals against the Islamic extremists. In Pakistan, it acted as a medium of dictatorial entrenchment and maintenance for over ten years, and the Awami League leadership understood this very well. This denouncement of secularism by the Pakistani state led to a culture of exclusion that undermined democratic ideals, which arguably culminated with the genocide of 1971.

According to the Constitution of Bangladesh, no religion-based politics is allowed under Article 38. Religion-based parties like Jamaat-e-Islam were outlawed under this section. This was an attempt to create a national and public welfare-based society that would disregard communalism as a political component. According to Mujib, the ideology provided by Islam in religion was capable of living in a secular spirit. To publicise this, he reintroduced the ancient decision of reading regularly from the religious books of other religions on national television and radio. It was thought that the rule of Mujib would be founded on a multi-theocracy.<sup>[8]</sup>

All this led to a period of religious and cultural discord amongst the various religious sects. The concept of establishing a new cooperative farming system angered affluent rural farmers, and the formation of the Rakhi Bahini, a paramilitary organisation between the state and the army, frustrated the Armed Forces. The authoritarianism shown by Mujib in the later years of his rule, and some of the policies like the abolition of civil liberties and the adoption of a new one-party system, undermined the liberal democrats in the country. Coupled with all of the above, the totality of the government failing to provide economic gains, food hoarding under control, corruption and cronyism caused a high level of disillusionment, which led to the assassination of Mujib in 1975. The new country was consequently hurled into a time of numerous coups, which would culminate in fifteen years of military rule. Anticolonial nationalistic hegemony gave way to the military regime of General Zia, which started to centralise state powers by reminding people about religious issues.

In consolidating his political power base, General Ziaur Rahman took measures that started to change Bengali culture and polity along more communal lines. In Bangladesh, religious politics emerged with the amendment of Article 38 of the Constitution. Eventually, the term secularism was removed, and added, a new provision of placing "full Faith in Almighty Allah" in article 8 (1) of the Constitution. It had also made some changes, entering the phrase "Bismillahir Rahamanir Rahim" at the top of the preamble. The 'war of national Liberation' replaced the 'war of national Independence'. Socialism was restructured to fit in the Islamic concept of social justice. Article 25(2) was changed to include a new section called Islamic solidarity, which enabled the nurturing of brotherly relations among Muslim nations.<sup>[9]</sup>



This was to diminish the contribution of Mujib and the Awami League in achieving Independence. The military regime thus opposed linguistic nationalism to territorial Islamic nationalism. This tried to create a new sense of national identity among the people of Bangladesh by distinguishing more emphatically the Bengalis of the Indian state of West Bengal, and here in Bangladesh. Following this, Bangladeshi nationals were referred to as the residents of Bangladesh as Bangladeshis (Article 6).<sup>[10]</sup>

The regime also built this form of Bangladeshi nationalism largely to distract people from the fact that the government was not bringing real change. This could be done through the process of Islamisation, aimed at attempting to prevent a legitimacy crisis in the face of a faltering economy and continued mass poverty.<sup>[11]</sup>

This allowed other leaders, like General H.M. Ershad in the 1980s, to start using religion for political purposes.

Although it is agreeable that Islam was politicised by these heads, the big question is to know to what extent the Islamisation process has, in an actual sense, taken root. Among its consequences was the effort to reform a few of its leading alleged 'collaborators' who had been tried in 1971, supposedly on the charge of being accomplices of the murder of intellectuals and other civilians. Most of these partners had been religious or political parties. They started exploiting each religious event to criticise the liberals and secularists of Bangladesh who have left Islam and the Prophet and accepted the Hindu Bengali Rabindranath Tagore as a cultural leader. Using these slogans, the right-wing establishment managed to export its communalism into the Bangladeshi model of nationalism. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was formed on an anti-Mujib ideology in 1978. In the same way, the second military government, which was led by General H. M. Ershad, had taken much zeal in continuing the work of his predecessor. He even took a step further by making Bangladesh an Islamic state.<sup>[12]</sup> The Bengali masses in 1971 had fought against an Islamic type of nationalism to attain a Bengali cultural-linguistic identity, but the succeeding military regimes did their part in gradually introducing an Islamic identity into Bangladesh politics.

### C. The rise of Islamic politics

When democracy was established in the 1990s, the patterns put in place by the military regimes did not change substantially, and terroristic activity, extremism, and communalism took place more often in Bangladesh in the 2000s. The most important alteration was that in the BNP-led government of 2001-2006, the forces of fundamentalism were now finding space quite conspicuously within the realm of legitimate politics as the principles of Liberation were being diminished. The BNP had always been linked with the ideology of the Bangla nation instead of the Bangali Nationalism that was traditionally linked with the Awami League. In the post-2001 election period, the attacks on the minorities, the moderate Muslims, as well as the liberal democratic elements and opposition politicians have increased tremendously. The Jamaat-I-Islami party was the Islamist party that was part of the ruling coalition led by the BNP. Islamic. Such Islamic organisations like the Islamic Chattra Shibir and HUJI-B also became politically legitimised in the Bangladesh political arena. This too constituted a very big shift because now forces which had earlier been discounted as collaborators had succeeded in capturing mainstream political space. Terrorist training camps were also on the increase during the same period. The Islamic Extremist groups like the

Jamat-ul-Mujahideen-Bangladesh (with a strong connection to the Afghan Jihadis) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami- Islami Bangladesh (related to Al-Qaeda) in Bangladesh have established and grown their institutional trans-border networks. In some quarters, scholars started questioning whether the Talibanization of Bangladesh was taking place.<sup>[13]</sup>

The features of such change were understood as the fact that the ideology and the spirits of the autonomy and Liberation struggle became less interesting in Bangladeshi politics, and the possibility of the resurrection of Islam as a factor that was supposed to support the accumulation of political power in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, the moderate forces regretted the suppression and evanescence of the country's left-of-centre and leftist politics.<sup>[14]</sup> Interestingly enough, since 2006, this has become less common, and narratives of Bangladesh being talibanized currently appear to be a little bit hysterical.

Economic underdevelopment, poverty, and unemployment were known to have fueled the rise of Islamic extremism. Bangladesh is a mostly agrarian population where more than forty per cent of the population is still below the poverty line. Underprivileged immigrants like *Rohigiyya* refugees systematically became targeted and exploited by religious fundamentalist interests. It is these domestic issues, as well as the mobilisation of international Islamic actors, which made it viable to use illiteracy and young people without any job to further Islamic extremism, even in a growing Madrasa sector. The aspects beyond Islamic revivalism and intolerance in Bangladesh are chiefly within the macro, meso and micro layers of the society and polity in Bangladesh. On the macro-level, the social-political elites of the community have adopted Islamism to play politics at the state level, and avert the mass poverty and joblessness. During this process, the external players, through utilising petro-dollars in Middle East nations, have enforced their prerogative of Islamism by means of charities in order to reinforce a Madrasa culture and patronise mosques. This domination has given an ideology of intolerance to the Muslims of Bangladesh (*Hanafi*) by the Middle Eastern Islam (*Hanabli*). At the meso (intermediate) level, the erosion of scholarship within the Islamic academic community and the failure of mainstream religious civil society, especially among the educated mullahs running mosques to demonstrate the real version of Islam to the people, have also created confusion among some Muslims. On a micro-scale, rising migration of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers to the Middle East has allowed movements to establish an authentic version of Islam in the Middle East over the Hanafi society, since those who migrate come back to impoverished and illiterate societies in Bangladesh.

Persistent economic underdevelopment, poverty, and unemployment contributed to the emergence of Islamic extremism. Bangladesh is largely an agricultural country, and over 40 per cent of its population remains below the poverty line. Religious fundamentalist groups were methodically preying upon unemployed immigrants like *Rohigiyya* refugees. These national developments, combined with the impact of global Islamic forces, not only offered a justification to use illiterate and jobless young people as a tool to pursue Islamic extremism, but also in a burgeoning Madrasa system. The causes of influences beyond Islamic revivalism and intolerance in Bangladesh can be found in the macro, meso, and micro layers of society and polity. On the macro level, Islamism has been used by the socio-political elites of the society as a political instrument to stay in power, to deflect mass poverty and unemployment issues. External

actors have played their role, factoring in petro-dollars by the Middle East nations, and in doing so have enforced their idea of Islamism by introducing charities to reunify the Madrasa culture and mosque patronising. This superiority of Middle Eastern Islam has introduced thoughts of intolerance amongst the Muslims in Bangladesh. At the meso (intermediate) level, the loss of scholarship in the Islamic academic sphere and the failure of mainstream religious civil society, especially the educated mullahs through the mosque system, to show society the real face of Islam, has resulted in confusion among some sections of Muslims. On the micro level, there has been the long-standing migration of uneducated, unskilled and semi-skilled labourers to the Middle East, which has supported other attempts to enforce an authentic Middle Eastern form of Islam onto the population of Bangladesh, as migrants come back to illiterate-majority societies in Bangladesh.

#### D. Islamic Politics and Secularism

The mainstream political parties in Bangladesh continue to uphold a secular type of politics, as seen through their slogans and manifestos. During the ninth parliamentary elections held in 2008, the Awami League promised to ban the application of religion and communalism in politics once it came to power and to revive courtesy and tolerance in the country's political culture.<sup>[15]</sup> The alliance partner of the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islam, the advocate of a stronger Islamic identity, on the other hand, said that in the event of winning the election, they would create a so-called blasphemy law to bar any anti-religious utterance and criticism of religion in books, newspapers, and electronic media. The most important thing was that the Jamaat insisted on providing the citizens between 20 and 30 years of military training over time under the watch of the defence forces. Jamaat did not detail the reason they wanted the people to be trained in this way, but it was a cause of concern for many because Islamist organisations have mostly used this type of training as a way of inculcating militancy. In the recent decade, the BNP-led political alliance had done little to fight Islamic extremism and, in the process, had contributed greatly to the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>[17]</sup> With the big win of the election giving seats to the Awami League in overwhelming numbers, the outcome appeared to project a nullification of the Jamaat-e-Islami form of Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh. The Head of the Awami League, Sheikh Hasina, had assured the people of Bangladesh that bring change, and the younger generation had played a significant role in the election win of the left-leaning secularists' alliance. Hasina referred to the language of a transformation, a transition, out of darkness to light, the shrouds of graft and corruption, violence and militancy to the light of a modern, secular and democratic country. Specifically, she has stressed the concept of restoring the spirit of 1971. Of the 300 parliamentary seats, the Awami League secured 262 seats, and it is the responsibility of these new MPs to create a new history in the history of Bangladesh. The command indicates that the people of Bangladesh voted for a party that won the nation's independence from Pakistan in the spirit of secularism. The forces of 1947 were soundly thrashed in the elections by those who believed in moderate democratic and secular ideals.

As we have seen historically, Bengali culture is largely inclusive, tolerant and syncretic. Time and time again, these socio-cultural values have been attacked and have dipped. The people have found it hard to uphold these fundamental values, the struggle to win the war against Pakistan in 1971, and even in the 2008 Parliamentary Elections, voting to bring

to power a secular alliance against the forces of intolerance. A recent ruling by the Bangladesh High Court has ordered the Government to restore the original Constitution of 1972. People of Bangladesh have at least in the present election avoided these dangers of extremism, at least in this election. An absolute majority in the government had replaced the Islamic symbolism in the parliament and restored the meaning of 'Secularism' (fifteenth amendment) in the constitution of Bangladesh. The best remedy to curb secular identity in Bangladesh society is to strengthen democracy and ensure there is a healthy civil society. Meanwhile, although the identity tensions continue to be a fault line traversing Bangladesh politics, there are other components in the equation. As illustrated by Mushtaq Khan, there exists now an entrenched network of political patronage and alliance-making by which, through electoral politics, each party has the opportunity to obtain power and resources in turn. Using this model, he contends that religious and secular identities are not very deep and are simple political instruments. The possibility that this system is a strong one is, perhaps, mediated by the fact that, since 1991, the Awami League changed with the BNP at each election and vice versa.<sup>[17]</sup>

When elections were held in January 2024, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) decided to boycott the votes once again to demand the transfer of power to a neutral caretaker government. This move was informed by the growing uneasiness about the validity of the electoral process. Most foreign observers considered those elections as rigged, but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stood her ground to hold the election during her government. She even invited foreign diplomats and observers, projecting the contest as a legitimate and fair electoral process. In the environment of high levels of political tensions, the regime led by Ms Hasina accused the opposition leaders of causing political unrest and resorted to mass arrests, further solidifying her control over the power in an environment where criticism was silenced with even greater intensity. She won a fifth term in office after what many would describe as a virtual one-party election with no obvious successor in the picture. Nonetheless, her rule has been met with a lot of criticism, regardless of this political success. As she boasted of some major infrastructural works (the completion of the Padma Bridge, several new airports, and a sophisticated road network), she also encountered a tidal wave of protests due to her repressive approaches against voices of dissent. Among them was an upsurge in student protests recently sparked off by a High Court decision ordering the reinstatement of quotas in the recruitment to the public services. Students took to the streets in loud protest of the proposed 30 per cent quota for the descendants of freedom fighters. Their demands became established quickly; not only did they want this quota to be abolished, but also an overhaul of the whole reservation system. The uproar continued and even led to demands for the resignation of Ms. Hasina as her government was fighting a burning battle on its power base in the face of growing civil strife. After all this, the prime minister of Bangladesh, Hasina, resigned and fled the country on 5th August 2024 to make way for a Neutral Interim Government headed by Prof. Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, on 8th August 2024, with the courtesy of the Bangladesh Military.<sup>[18]</sup>

Since the defeat of Sheikh Hasina, it seems fundamental Islamic groups such as the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Hifazat-e-Islam, and other Islamic parties of Bangladesh have moved toward institutional power. With the resignation of the Prime Minister, Hasina, the army chief of

the country, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, had a meeting with other political parties and Islamic political parties to debate the situation prevailing in the country and how an interim government could be formed. He informed the nation in a press conference that he had gathered the major political parties to discuss the emerging situation in Bangladesh, and he was the first person who refer to Jamaat-e-Islami, which is extremely important.<sup>[19]</sup> Professor AFM Khalid Hossain, founder of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, became a member of the Interim Government as one of the advisors when the new interim government was formed. The fact that the leader of Hefazat-e-Islam is included proves the presence of religious Islamic fundamentalist forces on the institutional level of access in the political system of Bangladesh.<sup>[20]</sup> Currently, it can be described in such terms as the influence of religious fundamentalist forces on the institutional level of the interim government of Bangladesh that the ideology of Bangladeshi nationalism based on Islamic religious identity is slowly being institutionalized in the politics of Bangladesh which attempts to eliminate the history of the liberation war in 1971 of Bangladesh.

### Conclusion

New controversies surrounding the notion of national identity have emerged in the post-Hasina era, since the interim regime has proposed a prohibition of the Awami League, on the grounds of national security (anti-terrorism acts), and has dropped the ban on the *Jamaat-e-Islami*. This move precedes another possible turn in the ideological orientation of the state.<sup>[21]</sup> The multiplication of 24 new political parties in barely nine months since Hasina was left, indicates that the political identity is still fragmented.<sup>[22]</sup>

In the context of Bangladesh, successive ruling political parties have played a pivotal role in constructing and/or reinterpreting the nation's political identity, often aligning it with their respective ideological orientations and governance agendas. Consequently, the process of nation-building in Bangladesh has experienced recurrent disruptions, hindering the emergence of a cohesive and distinctly articulated nation-state identity.

This reinterpretation of political identity has had a critical effect on the nation-building process in Bangladesh. Adherence to essential questions regarding the nature of the state has not existed, and as such, stable institutions and steady policies have been lacking. The changes in political leadership have come with constitutional reforms, policy U-turns, and the restructuring of institutions, which have threatened the continuity in governance. The identity crisis has come in different forms: marginalisation of ethnic minorities that do not fit into the Bengali or Bangladesh nationalist identities, periodic bouts of communal tensions between secularists and religious elements, and failure to develop a consistent foreign policy orientation that is reflective of stable national interests. Failure to institutionalise civilian control and establish democracy by the military has been highlighted through militarisation of politics, as evident through frequent coups and the fact that the military remains the ultimate arbiter of political controversies. This has contributed to external interference and a lack of capacity to build strong democratic institutions, due to the lack of stability in institutions.

The experience of Bangladesh shows how a lack of consensus over the identity of a nation may seriously destabilise a nation's identity-building efforts. This has been the situation with the transformation of political parties, changing power

between parties, each having its definition of what Bangladesh should be, thus leading to an institutional discontinuity cycle that has hindered the establishment of a stable nation-state. Instead of expanding on earlier successes, every new government has felt compelled to reconstruct the ideological roots of the state, and the process of nation-building or nation-identity is thus never complete and always open to contestation. The cycle of political violence, changes to the constitution, and a redefinition of identity is one that implies that the country has not quite reached the sort of harmonious national compromise that defines a thriving national identity. The establishment of nationhood in Bangladesh may well continue to be disrupted and unconsolidated until there is a wider national consensus than currently exists on the more fundamental questions of what a nation is, what role religion should play in the life and politics of the nation, and how the social and political problems of Bangladesh are to be solved.

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