In Search of an Identity: The Rise of Political Islam and Bangladeshi Nationalism

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* What are the variations which Asian cultural nationalisms display? How do we explain these?

* How viable are the emerging cultural nationalisms in Asia today, given the particularly fickle patterns of cultural production and consumption to which all cultures and ideologies are increasingly suspect under conditions of post-modernity and globalization?

Let me address some of the questions we have been given through the experience of Bangladesh, which is a relatively young country. There are two points I would like to consider in this short position paper: first, the internal contradictions that inform Bangladeshi nationalism which, in my analysis, leads to a religiously-identified nationalism; and second, the relationship between economic globalization/state formation and Islamic nationalism using Bangladesh as a case study.

In the South Asian context, Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) is a peculiar case because it did not undergo any long-term movement for its independence. It can be argued that the birth of Bangladesh was almost an accident, no one had really anticipated its creation until the war of liberation began in 1971 when the Indian army became involved, and eventually helped to liberate Bangladesh. While India had its own reasons for dismembering Pakistan (I will not go into those arguments here), it is important to note that the role of the Indian state in 1971 was "suspect" in the eyes of many Bangladeshi Muslims, and that suspicion continues to grow as many Bangladeshis keep an ever-watchful eye on the Hindu-utva movement in India.

Although the nationalist movement for cultural autonomy began in 1952 after the Pakistani leadership declared Urdu (spoken by only five percent of the population of East and West Pakistan) as the state language on the Bengali-speaking half, which formed sixty percent of the population, it did not evolve into a full-scale struggle for independence until 1971. The struggle for independence was relatively short and spanned only nine months. Moreover, the nationalist movement was a movement of the nationalist bourgeoisie who were preoccupied with questions of cultural and linguistic

autonomy. The cultural nationalists did not seriously address questions of national development such as economic development, land reform, universal education, etc. and lacked the will to move the country from poverty toward a path of development. While the Bangladeshi peasant fought for the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistani military domination, *s/he was not part of the nation-making project* and moreover, the language/culture debates of Bangladeshi cultural nationalists had no relevance to his/her life.

Having said that, it is important to note that one of the ongoing ideological struggles in Bangladesh is over the national identity question: are we Bengalis first, and Muslims second? Or are we Muslims first, and Bengalis second? Do we privilege language over religion or religion over language? Is a hyphenated identity possible where both sides are held in equilibrium by a cultural consensus? If that were to be the case, then what would be the rights of ethnic and religious minorities? I would argue that the very foundation of the Bangladeshi nation-state is anchored in an internal contradiction, a contradiction that is perhaps irreconcilable. The challenge then is to keep it in equilibrium so no one side gets exacerbated. Let me tease it out a bit. If Bangladeshis assert their Bengaliness over their religious identification (Bangladesh is now ninety percent Muslim), then they have to also address the following question: what distinguishes us from the Bengalis of West Bengal (India)? If we are all Bengalis, then why not become reunified with West Bengal? What is the basis of a separate nation-state for Bengalis unless there is another identity that is rooted elsewhere that can form the basis of that state? The answer to that question for many Bangladeshis is that they are Muslims and their culture, language, and religion is different from that of Bengali Hindus of West Bengal. In search of this elsewhere for example, many Bangladeshis speak in a de-Sanskritized Bengali language and use more Arabic and Persian words. There is a slippage here between religion and culture, and religion and language, and religion becomes the privileged marker of identity. It must be mentioned here that Bangladeshi Muslims are also articulating a deep-rooted fear—the specter of caste Hindu domination, which has a long history in Bengal— and this fear informs discussions in Bangladesh.

But religious identity need not necessarily devolve into a hyper-nationalist identity, and perhaps an effective safeguard against it is the religious neutrality of the state. This is an area of struggle in Bangladeshi cultural politics. For cultural nationalists, language/culture is the more important determinant of identity, and they seek a panethnic Bengali identity with Bengalis living in West Bengal (India). For religious nationalists, Bangladeshi Muslims must reject residual aspects of folk Islam and strictly follow the Saudi Arabian interpretation of Islam and its codes. It is this group that has gained power in recent years because of state patronage. In the third place are nationalists who advocate a national identity, which is rooted in the indigenous folk culture of Bangladesh, one that rejects the ultra-nationalism of both the Islamic and cultural nationalists and attempts to revive the folk Islam of the peasants in Bengal to the national level.

What is significant although not surprising is that a country that was inaugurated on the basis of ethno-linguistic nationalism (we are Bengalis, we want a nation of Bengali-speaking people) very soon shifted toward a religiously-inflected nationalism, that is, the new nationalism known as Bangladeshi nationalism, which was introduced by the first military ruler, and now continues to define contemporary politics and culture.

Bangladeshi nationalism was introduced in 1975 by the first military dictator (Ziaur Rahman) and overlay the older ethno-linguistic nationalism known as Bengali nationalism upon which the country was inaugurated in 1971. At the time of its inauguration Bangladeshi nationalism had two objectives: (a) to incorporate all Bangladeshi citizens, whether Bengali or not, under one national identity; and (b) to articulate a differentiated Bengali identity that was *distinct* from the identity of Bengalis living in West Bengal, India. Although the category "Bangladeshi" was supposed to be a more inclusive category that embraced all citizens, whether Bengali-speaking or not, it effectively narrowed the definition of what it meant to be a Bangladeshi, and introduced an Islamic wedge into the national consciousness. Furthermore, in order to consolidate his power base, the first military dictator started his own political party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) that took as its founding principle Bangladeshi nationalism, which was the commingling of religion with ethnicity. The creation of BNP also bifurcated electoral politics in Bangladesh along religious lines, BNP supporters are

overwhelmingly Muslim, and Awami League (AL) supporters are overwhelming Hindus and other religious and ethnic minorities. The unfolding of Bangladeshi nationalism also led to increasing disenfranchisement of citizens who are not Bengali or Muslim (the Adivasis and Hindus for example, and the 250,000 Bihari Muslims who remain stateless people in UNHCR refugee camps), thereby, raising a whole range of questions about the nature of the Bangladeshi state, democracy, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. It is not surprising then that Bangladeshi nationalism soon paved the way for a hyper Islam-identified nationalism and became a tool in the nation-making project of the military dictators.

The second contradiction in the construction of the state was use of secularism in the Constitution in 1972. The 1972 Constitution extolled the virtues of secularism, which translated into *dharmo niropekhota* or the neutrality of the state toward all religions. What was less clear though was to what extent "secularism" as a value was embraced by the majority of Bangladeshi Muslims. Majority of Bangladeshi Muslims consider themselves as pious and God-fearing Muslims, and one could effectively argue that they would not favor a secular state. Thus, secularism as a value was not based on a consensus of the population but was imposed from above by the ruling party, the Awami League, whose constituency was urban and middle-class. Secularism was not a humanistic ideal that was actively cultivated by the state. It was a political tool wielded to ban the Islamic political parties (the Muslim League and Jamaat-i-Islami) in the country. Surely then, it is not surprising that secularism as an ideal disintegrated with the assassination of the leader of the Awami League in 1975.

State Policies, Development and Islamic Nationalism

The first military dictator Ziaur Rahman's ascension to power in 1975 coincided with several global trends and development policy mandates. On the one hand, the oil boom of the seventies had made the Arab states financially powerful, and on the other, it coincided with the 1975 UN Decade for Women and policies that specifically targeted women in the developing world. In order to legitimize his rule in the Muslim world, and to appease Western donors, the military dictator capitalized on both of these trends. He removed secularism from the Constitution and inserted in its place "absolute faith and

trust in Allah." He also included a phrase in the Constitution that Bangladesh was part of the Islamic *Ummah* (the brotherhood of Islamic nations) with an aim to develop fraternal ties with Muslim nations. The second military ruler made Islam the state religion in 1988.

On an institutional level, Islam was made a part of everyday life from the transmission of the *azan* on state-run TV and radio stations to the establishment of various institutions focused on the cultivation of religion , such as the Ministry of Religion, Islamic universities, and madrassahs. The Islamic Academy, which was formerly a small institution, was transformed into the Islamic Foundation, the largest umbrella organization of research on Islam in the country. One of the key contributions of the Islamic Foundation to the process of Islamization was the translation of the Quran into Bengali hence making the Quran cheaply and readily available to the people. Zia also reinstated the Jamaat-i-Islami and several other Islamic political parties that were banned after the independence of Bangladesh and allowed them to again participate in electoral politics. This helped him to appease local Islamic groups in the country, and also to gain legitimacy as a Muslim leader among Muslim countries.

While Zia was shifting Bangladesh toward an Islamic ideology, he also turned to Western donors for development dollars. In order to garner development funds, he promoted women's participation in public works programs and NGO activities that targeted women. He established a Ministry of Women's Affairs, recruited women into the police force, and reserved parliamentary seats for women.

At the same time, he bifurcated the constituency of the left political parties—the peasantry—by introducing the development NGO into the rural sphere. Thus, both the left political parties and the development NGO were vying over the same client base. The NGOs flush with aid money won out because they had resources and well-managed programs that the rural people could benefit from. The left political parties did not have a vision that would appeal to the peasants, whereas, the NGOs offered them credit, literacy programs, healthcare and other training programs which they found useful. In the process, the NGOs have created their own constituencies and have brought their beneficiaries into new forms of social regulation as subjects of neoliberal economic policies. In this depoliticization of left politics, many left party leaders and cadres have

abandoned party ideology and joined the development NGO sector as an alternative to revolutionary politics, thereby, creating a vacuum in the left political sphere in Bangladesh.

In order to consolidate their power base, the two military dictators wooed the Islamic parties, and simultaneously promoted madrassah education alongside the secular education of the state. At the time of Zia's rise to power in 1975, there were 1,976 government madrassahs with an enrollment of 375,000 students. By the year 2002, the number had risen to 15,661 and the enrollment had jumped to 2,824,672.

The military dictators also supported the growth of the private madrassah system known as the Quomi (People's) Madrassah which follows a curriculum from the Deobandh School, established in 1857in Uttar Pradesh in North India. Following the legacy of the Deobandh school, the Quomi madrassahs only teach the Quran, Hadith, Sunnah, and an orthodox interpretation of the sharia to its students. Its students are taught to recite the Quran in ancient Arabic. It is estimated that the Quomi Madrassahs number around another 15,000 (there is no official number available) and unofficial sources estimate that they have an enrollment of over two million plus students.

The funding sources of Quomi madrassahs are shrouded in secrecy but they do not accept any government funds. The Bangladeshi Quomi Madrassahs received patronage from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Libya in the seventies through the nineties. They also receive private donations from overseas Bangladeshis, primarily from the United Kingdom and the Middle East. As to their current sources of funding in the aftermath of 9/11, I cannot speculate. In the seventies, oil companies in the Middle East recruited Bangladeshis as labor to work in the oil fields. For these men, it was their fist global contact and exposure to the Islam of Saudi Arabia. Upon their return home, they were keen on reforming the "impure" folk Islamic tradition of rural Bangladesh through their patronage of the Quomi madrassah schools. In addition to this, local patrons also establish and donate money to madrassahs in order to garner votes in local elections. These religious actions are considered as acts of piety by villagers, and earn politically ambitious patrons the goodwill and the votes of rural people.

The result of these calculated political moves by the military was paradoxical. One side of the official face of Bangladesh took on an Islamic appearance, while the

other side brought women into the public sphere as heads of state, public servants, police, members of parliament, labor, activists, and as NGO beneficiaries in loan and voter education programs. These moves were made to ensure a constituency for the party in power, but in the process, it has strengthened Islamic political parties and Islamic nationalism in the country, which is neither a fickle pattern of cultural production nor a chimera but a frightening reality.