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## **Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh: Genesis, Dynamics and Implications**

**A**pparently, the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 in the name of Bengali nationalism signaled the departure of “political Islam” or Islam-based state ideology of the Pakistani period (1947–71). To some scholars, the creation of Bangladesh delegitimized the “two-nation theory,” which in 1947 justified the communal partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Soon after its emergence, Bangladesh adopted the four-pronged state ideology of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. However, not long after the emergence of the nation-state, Islam re-emerged as an important factor in the country, both socially and politically. Although the not-so-democratic regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972–75) retained secularism, along with democracy, socialism and nationalism, as the state principles, his assassination and the overthrow of his government by a military coup d’état in August 1975 brought Islam-oriented state ideology by shunning secularism and socialism. Not long after his ascendancy as the new ruler in November 1975, General Ziaur Rahman replaced the outwardly secular “Bengali nationalism” with “Bangladeshi nationalism.” One may argue that “Bangladeshi” is

inclusive of the different non-Bengali minorities; nevertheless, the term highlights the Muslim identity of the country, differentiating its Muslim majority Bengalis from their Hindu majority counterparts in West Bengal in India.

It is noteworthy that most Bangladeshi Muslims suffer from a tremendous identity crisis. They are not sure which comes first—their loyalty toward Islam or toward Bangladesh. It seems, after the failure of the “socialist-secular-Bengali nationalist” Mujib government in 1975, his successors realized the importance of political Islam to legitimize their rule; hence, the rapid Islamization of the polity. This type of state-sponsored Islam, reflecting the hegemonic culture of the civil and military oligarchies seeking political legitimacy, may be classified as “political Islam.” This is not typical to Bangladesh and has happened elsewhere in the Muslim world. Countries such as Egypt and Algeria, for example, which also went through socialist and secular phases of their history under Nasser, Ben Bella and Boumediene before turning to “political/militant Islam” in the recent past. Very similar to Egypt and Algeria, while the successors of Nasser and Boumediene have adopted political Islam to legitimize their rule, the successors of Mujib also adopted political Islam after the failure of the “welfare state” or the promised socialist utopia. The case of Pakistan is very different. The ruling classes there have established their hegemony by legitimizing themselves in the name of Islam—the *raison d’être* for Pakistan, which has a special significance for the bulk of the Pakistani Muslims.

Meanwhile, like their counterparts elsewhere, Bangladeshi Muslims at the different levels have adopted various other types of Islam—escapist, fatalist, puritan, and militant, for example—as alternatives to their failed welfare state. An understanding of political Islam and other variables in the arena of Bangladesh politics requires an intimate knowledge of what the people need and what the leaders have been promising them since the inception of the separatist movement for Bangladesh in the 1960s. The gap between what the people have attained since independence and what the liberal-democrat, socialist-secular and nationalist leaders (both “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi”) have been promising to deliver is the key to our understanding of the problem.

This chapter addresses why and how Islam has re-emerged in Bangladesh as socially and politically significant by highlighting both the local and external factors in this regard. This study examines the nature of Islam in South Asia and elsewhere in the Muslim world. A historical appraisal of the State-Islam-*Ulema* (Muslim theologians) nexus and its gradual transformation are important aspects of this study. In sum, the study shows that both the state and large sections of the population have been using Islam for political purpose. While secularism, democracy and independence are burning issues in the political arena, nobody can ignore the cultural and political aspects of Islam in Bangladesh. Various groups of nationalists, sections of the ulema representing both the political and non-political organizations, and even members of the armed forces from time to time champion the cause of Islam—some of them by openly demanding the transformation of the country into a *shari'a*-based “Islamic State,” and some by opposing liberal democratic and secular institutions with a bias toward political Islam. Who will eventually call the shots in the near future is the question.

Since Bangladesh is the third-largest Muslim country in the world (after Indonesia and Pakistan), it is only natural to assume that Islam plays an important role in molding its politics and culture. Around 90 percent of the population is Muslim—most importantly, representing one of the poorest, least literate and most backward sections of the world population. If mass poverty, illiteracy and unequal distribution of wealth have any positive correlation with Islamic resurgence and militancy, then Bangladesh has to be a fertile breeding ground of what is wrongly defined as “Islamic fundamentalism.” Of late, the Awami League (the party under Sheikh Mujib that championed the cause of greater autonomy for East Pakistan, ultimately leading to the independence of Bangladesh) has been projecting its main political opponents—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-i-Islami (partners in the BNP-led coalition government since October 2001)—as “fundamentalist” with a view to gaining political leverage after its abysmal performance in the parliamentary elections held in October 2001.<sup>1</sup> However, despite its poverty, backwardness and the preponderance of Islamic ethos in the mainstream of its politics and

1. *Bangladesh Observer* and *Daily Star*, October 3, 4 and 5, 2001.

culture, Bangladesh is not just another Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia or even Pakistan. Despite having many striking similarities with the Islamic movements elsewhere, their Bangladeshi counterparts have striking dissimilarities with them as well.

## **The Nature of Islamic Movements in Bangladesh**

HERE, ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS have another dimension—they are primarily rural-based, agrarian and reflective of peasant culture and behavior. The country is predominantly agrarian, with more than 80 percent of the population being rural, mostly impoverished peasants primarily depending on primitive modes of cultivation, having incomplete access to the means of production, lacking power, security of tenure and viable means of sustenance and employment. And as we know, peasants, being traditional, fatalist and religious if not pious by nature, often resort to religion as a means of identity as well as support and sustenance. In short, peasants' political behavior and culture are not devoid of religion. Their mundane activities, including the political ones (in power perspectives), are inspired by their "moral economy,"<sup>2</sup> which again is subject to their religious belief system. Consequently, peasants' violent acts and proclivity to anarchy in the name of religion, often classified as "prepolitical" activities of the "premodern,"<sup>3</sup> get the epithets of "Islamic" militancy, fanaticism, and "fundamentalism" if the perpetrators happen to be Muslims. Hence, the significance of the peasant factor in understanding Islam in Bangladesh society and politics.

Although the "peasants' Islam," or what we may call the "little traditions," to paraphrase Redfield, represents the mainstream of Islam in Bangladesh, urban Muslim elite and their rural counterparts, representing the "great traditions" of Islam, have been the main custodians and guardians of Islam in the country. It is, however, interesting that not only are the "little traditions" of Bangladesh very different from their counterparts elsewhere, but the "great traditions" of Islam

2. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 5, 9, 13–55; Taj I. Hashmi, "Moral, Rational and Political Economies of Peasants: An Appraisal of Colonial Bengal and Vietnam" (paper presented at the Second International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies, Perth, 1984).

3. Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 4–20.

as believed and practiced here are also very unique. The synthesis of the two traditions, leading to syncretism, is what prevails as “Islam” in Bangladesh. Despite their concerted efforts, the Islamic puritan reformers, the “Wahabis,” Faraizis, Tayyunis and others since the early nineteenth century, have been able to change little in this regard. While sections of ultra-orthodox Muslims claim to be adherents of the Islamic “great traditions,” they have also inherited syncretistic beliefs and rituals as their forebears were not immune to the “little traditions” of Arabia, Central Asia, Iran and northwestern India and Bengal.<sup>4</sup>

### Who are the Islamists?

THIS STUDY REQUIRES AN UNDERSTANDING of the two parties that have been championing the cause of Islam—one, on behalf of the Government since 1975 and the other, the various Islamic groups, parties and individuals with both pro- and anti-government inclinations. These groups and individuals may be classified as (a) the fatalist/escapist; (b) the Sufis/*pirs*; (c) the militant reformist (“fundamentalist”), and (d) the “Anglo-Mohammedan” (“opportunist”/“pragmatist”). The fatalist/escapist groups represent the bulk of the poor, unemployed/underemployed people having a next-worldly outlook and philosophy. They often belong to the Tableeq Jamaat; a grassroots-based puritan movement originated in northern India in the 1920s, having millions of adherents in Bangladesh. Unlike the militant reformists belonging to the Jamaat-i-Islami (despite their formal adherence to constitutional politics) and other groups, including the clandestine ones, the Tableeqis represent a pacifist, puritan and missionary movement. Every winter they organize a mammoth rally or *ijtima* at Tunji, near Dhaka, attended by more than a million devout Muslims from Bangladesh and elsewhere. The Sufis and *pirs* represent mystic Islam. They belong to several mystic orders or *tariqas*, having *muridan* or disciples among all sections of the population, especially among peasants. They exert tremendous influence on their muridan. They may be politically motivated having renowned politicians,

4. Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), passim; Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh: Beyond Subjection and Tyranny* (London: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 60–74.

including General Ershad, as their muridan. They are generally opposed to the Jamaat-i-Islami and Tableeq movements, but there are instances of Jamaatis and Tableeqis paying respect to certain pirs. While the militant reformists, including the Jamaat-i-Islami, are in favor of an Islamic state as an alternative to the existing system of government in Bangladesh, the “Anglo Mohammedans” are the anglicized or Westernized Muslims aiming to synthesize Islamic and Western values for temporal benefits. They can be believers, agnostics and even atheists, but for the sake of expediency, political legitimacy, social acceptance and above all, power, are often vacillating. They popularize political Islam, which could be avowedly anti-Indian and tacitly anti-Hindu. They are very similar to the Pakistani ruling class who, since the inception of the country, has been promoting the communal, anti-India/anti-Hindu political Islam for the sake of legitimacy. It is noteworthy that the followers of the above groups might shift allegiance. A Tableeqi might join the Jamaat-i-Islami (as Jamaat leader Ghulam Azam did) and an Anglo-Mohammedan might turn Tableeqi one day.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite their mutual differences and enmity, especially between the orthodox ulema/pirs and the Jamaat-i-Islami, these groups have certain commonalities. Excepting the Anglo-Mohammedans, the other three groups oppose women’s liberation; Western codes of conduct, law and ethics, and even dress and culture; and are in favor of establishing shari’a or Islamic law. The most important aspect, which is common to all four groups, is their stand vis-à-vis India and Pakistan. They are invariably anti-Indian and pro-Pakistan. It may be mentioned that the ulema belonging to the “Wahabi” school of thought, who run thousands of *madrassas* or Islamic seminaries with an ultra-orthodox and conservative curricula throughout Bangladesh, are inimical to the Jamaat-i-Islami and its founder, Maulana Mauddudi (1903–79).<sup>6</sup> The

5. Hashmi, “Islam in Bangladesh Politics,” in Hussin Mutalib and Taj I. Hashmi, eds., *Islam, Muslims and the Modern State* (London: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 103–5; Razia Akter Banu, “Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh: Challenges and Prospects,” in Mutalib and Hashmi, *Islam, Muslims*, 80–96; K. M. Mohsin, “Tabligh Jama’at and the Faith Movement in Bangladesh,” in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed., *Bangladesh: Society, Religion and Politics* (Chittagong: South Asia Studies Group, 1985).

6. Maulana Mansurul Haq, ed., *Mr. Mawdudir New Islam* (Bengali), Jamia Qurania Arabia (Lalbagh, Dhaka: 1985), passim; *Jamaat Unmasked: The True Colour of a Fundamentalist Party* (Dhaka: The Council of National Religious Scholars [Jatiyo Olama Parishad], 2001), passim. These publications reflect the views of the anti-Jamaat Muslim clerics, mainly belonging to the Deoband school of thought, who run the qauami madrassas in the subcontinent.

counterparts of these seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan, known as *qaumi* (national) madrassas, produced the *Taliban*. The “pro-Taliban” groups in Bangladesh, for ideological reasons, are opposed to the Jamaat-i-Islami. However, as it happened in Pakistan, they might unite against common enemies at the height of polarization between Islam and some other forces, especially in the wake of 9/11, the Afghan War of 2001 and the Israeli invasion of the Palestinian territory in March and April 2002.

## Historical Overview

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW of the Islamization process in East Bengal, along with an understanding of the socio-political history of the region, especially with regard to the Pakistanization of the region with peasant, petty bourgeois and middle class support, is essential for understanding the problem. Muslim peasants and other underdogs joined the Pakistan movement with hopes to circumscribe the power of the Hindu landlords, middle classes and traders. Their eventual overthrow and replacement by the weaker, budding Muslim middle classes and upper peasantry were parts of the Bengali Muslim “peasant utopia.”<sup>7</sup> The emergence of Bangladesh after the overthrow of the dominant non-Bengali Muslim elites by the subjugated Bengali Muslims did not signal the disappearance of the age-old fault line between the Muslims and Hindus of the subcontinent. The creation of Bangladesh did not destroy the two-nation theory of the founding fathers of Pakistan. Renowned Indian journalist, Basant Chatterjee, makes this irrevocable argument:

Somebody should ask these hypocrites if they could give one good reason for the separate existence of Bangladesh after the destruction of the two-nation theory. If the theory has been demolished, as they claim, then the only logical consequence should be the reunion of Bangladesh with India, as seems to be the positive stand of the Bangladeshi Hindus.... for the people know that had Pakistan not been created then, Bangladesh too would not have come into existence now.<sup>8</sup>

7. Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, chapters 5, 6 and 7.

8. Basant Chatterjee, *Inside Bangladesh Today: An Eye-witness Account* (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1973), 155.

Chatterjee further apprehends that with the gradual shifting of Hindus to India due to the prevalent anti-Hindu feelings in the country, “Bangladesh would by itself become ‘Muslim Bengal.’”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, one may argue that with the creation of Bangladesh, the “Hindu phobia” of Bengali Muslims—a legacy since the British colonial days, which transformed into “Indophobia” during the Pakistani period (1947–71)—is still present in the psyche of the average Bangladeshi Muslim. As the peasant factor is important for understanding the Islamization process in the country, so too is the “India factor.” An understanding of the predominant petty bourgeois and lumpen culture is also essential in this regard. They are equally, if not more, violent, anarchical and vacillating as the peasantry.

Bengali peasant support for the various Islamic movements since the early nineteenth century not only projects the violent, “pre-political” and non-committal aspects of the peasant community, but also suggests how vulnerable Muslim peasants have been to the manipulative leaders who mobilize mass support in the name of Islam or any other ideology. It is noteworthy that before their political mobilization took place in the early nineteenth century by Islamic reformists-cum-militants, the Wahabi and Faraizi leaders, East Bengali peasants and aboriginal tribesmen had come under the influence of “warrior-Sufis” in the late medieval period. The warrior-Sufis were mainly responsible for the rapid Islamization and peasantization of the region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, converting the bulk of the indigenous population who had not yet fully integrated into the amorphous Hindu and peasant communities. Sufis played the leading role in reclaiming land by clearing forests in the deltaic southeastern “frontier land.” They introduced a new religion, Islam, as well as new agrarian implements and technology, such as the plough and other methods to contain the turbulent rivers, which were shifting eastward during the period.<sup>10</sup>

The Wahabi and Faraizi leaders, and especially the most influential Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (1800–1873), a former Wahabi-turned-“loyalist” Islamic reformer of the nineteenth century, brought the syncretistic Bengali Muslims, mainly peasants, into the fold of shari’a-

9. *Ibid.*, 143.

10. Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), chapters 5 and 8.



based, orthodox and puritan Islam. The Wahabi and Faraizi leaders mobilized Bengali Muslim masses against British colonial rule as well as against the local exploiting classes of (Hindu) *zamindars* (landlords), *bhadralok* (professionals) and *mahajans* (moneylenders). The first step toward the mobilization process was through the extensive Islamization of the masses. Karamat Ali and his hundreds of successors, who adopted pro-British loyalist attitude out of pragmatism after the failure of the Indian Mutiny of 1857–58, not only Islamized the bulk of the Bengali Muslims but also created a strong sense of belonging to an amorphous Muslim community of the subcontinent.<sup>11</sup> The omnipotence of the Islamic reformers in the absence of a powerful modern and moderate Muslim leadership in nineteenth-century Bengal led to the ascendancy of the ulema as political and religious leaders of the Muslim community. The Hindu revivalist movements, as well as the anti-Muslim socio-economic and political stand of the bulk of the Hindu elites and middle classes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, further strengthened the hold of the ulema and their patrons, the *ashraf* (aristocratic, upper-class Muslims), on the Bengali Muslim masses. The Hindu opposition to legislative and other government measures to benefit the Bengali Muslims, such as the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, its amendments, the enactment of the Bengal Free (rural) Primary Education Bill and the establishment of the Dhaka University in Muslim majority East Bengal, further antagonized the latter toward the Hindus and prepared them as staunch supporters of the communal partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

The re-emergence of the ulema in the arena of Bengal politics in 1919, spearheading the pervasive anti-British Khilafat (Caliphate) movement with Muslim support at every level, Islam and ulema continued to play very important roles in the political mobilization of the Bengali Muslims up to the partition of 1947. The Muslim elite, the *ashraf-ulema-jotedar* triumvirate, representing Muslim aristocrats, clergy, and rich peasants/petty landlords, successfully mobilized Bengali Muslims against the dominant Hindu *zamindar-bhadralok-mahajan* triumvirate, common enemy of both the upper- and lower-class

11. See A. R. Mallick, *British Policy and the Muslims in Bengal, 1757–1856*, 2nd ed. (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977), chapters 3, 4 and 5; Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement*, 2nd ed. (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 1984), passim; Hashmi, "Karamat Ali and the Muslims in Bengal, 1800–1873," in *Dhaka University Studies* 23 (June 1976).

Muslims. By 1947, this mobilization in the name of separate Muslim identity led to the transformation of East Bengal into the eastern wing of Pakistan. The arousal of Muslim communal solidarity among the bulk of Bengali Muslim masses as an alternative to class solidarity demonstrates that religion and ethnicity always have the potential to become more important than class differences.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting that despite the constant harping on the themes of Islamic solidarity and Muslim separatism under the aegis of the Pakistani ruling classes during 1947 and 1971, most East Bengali Muslims distanced themselves from “communal/political Islam.” Not long after the Partition of 1947, East Bengali Muslims started preferring secular institutions, including democracy, to Islam for the sake of their Bengali identity. The clash of these two identities—“Islamic” (Pakistani) and “secular” (Bengali)—ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh. This was possible after the mass emigration of members of the Hindu *zamindar-bhadralok-mahajan* triumvirate to India and the emasculation of the rest of the hitherto dominant Hindus in East Bengal in the wake of the Partition. Not long after the Partition, it dawned upon sections of the East Bengali Muslim elites that Pakistan, the promised utopia of Muslim separatist leaders, was nothing but a mirage—the “promised land” of South Asian Muslims was a deceptive arrangement to exploit the eastern wing as a colony of the western wing of Pakistan. Gradually, sections of the masses became aware of the reality. This transformation was possible as the founding fathers of Pakistan promised “everything to everyone” with a view to gaining support for Muslim separatism in the name of Islamic fraternity, liberty and equality. Not only Bengali and non-Bengali Muslim politicians were selling the idea of the “golden Pakistan” to the Bengali Muslims, but leading Bengali Muslim intellectuals—academics and writers—also played very significant roles in the mass mobilization for Pakistan. One may agree with the view that “any attempt to understand the disenchantment with the Muslim League [which championed the cause of Muslim separatism and Pakistan] after independence has to take into account the initial hopes and expectations that brought the League into power in the first place.”<sup>13</sup>

12. Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengali Muslim 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), 84–95, 160–65, 190; Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, chap. 7.

13. Ahmed Kamal, “A Land of Eternal Eid—Independence, People and Politics in East Bengal,” in *Dhaka University Studies* 46 (June 1989): 81.

## **Islam, Secularism and Bengali Nationalism, 1972–75**

BENGALI NATIONALISM, more precisely, East Bengali nationalism, had been the guiding principle of Sheikh Mujib's Awami League, which eventually formed the first government in independent Bangladesh. The exclusion of the Indian Bengalis (mostly Hindus, who opted to live as citizens of the Indian state in the wake of the partition of 1947) as members of the Bengali nation as defined by the Awami League, practically indicated that the Muslim majority Bengalis of the erstwhile East Pakistan wanted to secede from the dominant and exploiting non-Bengali West Pakistan out of sheer economic, political and cultural differences. By "culture," the top leaders and the bulk of the followers of the movement for Bengali nationalism only meant linguistic and other aspects of culture, excluding religion. This means they were (are) Bengalis but nevertheless remained (remain) Muslims at the same time. They never visualized, let alone fought, for a secular/socialist Bangladesh. Had the Pakistani ruling elite in 1971, instead of killing Bengalis indiscriminately accepted Sheikh Mujib, the leader of the majority party Awami League, as the prime minister of Pakistan, "Bengali nationalism" would have got a totally new meaning, by only highlighting the separate ethnic/linguistic identity of East Bengalis of Pakistan. However, the rulers of the new nation of Bangladesh for various reasons—mainly political—adopted the four-pronged state ideology of "Bengali nationalism," socialism, secularism and democracy, à la Nehruvian "democratic socialism" (often touted as "Mujibism").

The abysmal failure of Mujibism to alleviate poverty and restore law and order eventually led to the Islamization of the polity. The failure of the welfare state forced a large section of the underdogs to cling to Islam either as a means to escape from the harsh reality or to achieve their cherished Golden Bengal through piety, Islamic justice and egalitarianism. Without having substantial changes in living conditions (around 50 percent of the population still live below the poverty line), the tide of Globalization in the post-Cold War period has not reduced the Islamic fervor of the people. The obsolescence of socialism/communism as an alternative to "illiberal democracy" and autocracy in the Third World since the early 1990s, and the sudden rise in the intensity of Islamic resurgence and "Islamic" terror

globally in recent years have further intensified Islamism in Bangladesh.

The overall situation of the country in the wake of the liberation of 1971 was unbearable for the bulk of the people. Although there was relief from the nine-month-long reign of terror under the Pakistani occupation army, the liberation did not bring the expected end of suffering and exploitation. Fellow Bangladeshis, genuine and pseudo freedom fighters, mostly donning the Awami hat, started a reign of unbridled corruption, nepotism and lawlessness throughout the country. While Awami leaders, in the name of socialism, were busy plundering the nationalized industries, banks and insurance companies, and “abandoned” non-Bengali properties previously owned by Urdu-speaking refugees from Bihar, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, the bulk of the Bengalis were soon turned into the disillusioned, hungry and angry masses. By 1974, Bangladesh had already become the “basket case” of Henry Kissinger. The floods and subsequent famine of 1974 eliminated thousands and impoverished most of the population. By then, the promised “rice at fifty *paisa* (half a taka) per *seer* (slightly less than a kilogram),” contrary to the Awami League promise on the eve of the 1970s parliamentary elections, was selling at ten taka per *seer*. Even during the Liberation War of 1971, the finest variety of rice, the staple food, was selling at one taka per *seer*. Other consumer goods were selling at ten to twenty times cheaper during the last days of united Pakistan in comparison to the mid-1970s. Hyperinflation, corruption and non-availability of essentials soon turned the average Bangladeshi into an anti-Indian/anti-Awami Leaguer. This is well reflected in Basant Chatterjee’s conversation with a rickshaw-puller in 1973 in Bangladesh. The rickshaw-puller blamed the Awami League and India for his misery: “Ever since the ‘*azadi*’ [independence] has come, we poor people are only having our backs broken. In older times, we made about five takas a day, but then rice was available at one taka a *seer*....But now...we need five for the rice only....For us poor people Pakistan was all right. At least, we had enough “*bhat*” [cooked rice] then to eat to our fill....All these thugs [Awami Leaguers] are looting the country, and along with them their friend India is also looting the country.”<sup>14</sup> Many of them swelled the ranks of the opposition groups and parties, including the leftist National

14. Chatterjee, *Inside Bangladesh Today*, 68–70.

Socialist Party (JSD) and the clandestine Maoist Sarbahara Party of Siraj Sikdar. A large number of them, including many erstwhile collaborators of the Pakistani occupation forces, joined hands with Maulana Bhashani (the champion of “Islamic socialism”) who soon after the liberation started a vitriolic anti-Awami, anti-Indian campaign. Bhashani’s popularity and the sharp decline in that of Prime Minister Mujib paved the way for the rise of various Islamic groups not long after the assassination of the latter in 1975. Mujib, on the one hand, promoting the idea that secularism “did not mean the absence of religion,” was giving generous state patronage to madrasa education and, on the other hand, religion for his government “was a shadow, the ghost of the past one did not know how to deal with.”<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, by early 1975, the Mujib government had crushed both the JSD and the Sarbahara Party, the secular and leftist opposition groups. While the bulk of the JSD leaders were behind bars, in January 1975 Sarbahara leader Siraj Sikdar was killed in police custody. Justifying his killing, Prime Minister Mujib boastfully raised the question in the parliament (televised nationwide): “Where is Siraj Sikdar?” The last straw on the camel’s back was the introduction of the one-party government under Sheikh Mujib, in the name of the so-called Bangladesh Peasants’ and Workers’ Awami League (BKSAL). This act established a Soviet-style government where top-ranking bureaucrats, university teachers, and even the chiefs and deputy chiefs of the armed forces, had to join the BKSAL. This act in January 1975, on the one hand killed the remnants of whatever was left of democracy and, on the other, rendered underground, clandestine politics—both secular and Islamic—as the only option for the people.<sup>16</sup>

## **Political Islam and Bangladeshi Nationalism, 1975–81**

IN THE LONG RUN, the Islamic parties outpaced the various secular/leftist parties in the wake of the overthrow of the BKSAL regime in August 1975. Henceforth, both the military and civil governments of

15. Syed Jamil Ahmed, “Bengali Nationalism through Sociology of Theatre,” in A. M. Chowdhury and Fakrul Alam, eds., *Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2002), 301.

16. Zillur R. Khan, *Martial Law to Martial Law: Leadership Crisis in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1984), chap. 4.

the country promoted political Islam to contain the militant one promoted by the grassroots-based, well-organized Jamaat-i-Islami and other groups. It is noteworthy that General Zia's government (1975–81) withdrew the ban imposed on all Islam-oriented political parties by the Mujib government for their active collaboration with the Pakistani occupation forces in 1971. Zia and his successors promoted Islam and Islamic parties, including the Jamaat and Muslim League, for the sake of legitimacy and for containing the most organized Awami League.<sup>17</sup>

From the rapid success of President Zia in popularizing his ideals, programs and most importantly, his regime, among the bulk of Bangladeshis, it appears that political Islam fetched him rich dividends. Curiously, what "soldier" Zia grasped quite well—that the country was least prepared for socialism and secularism—was simply beyond "politician" Mujib's comprehension. His associates, mostly sycophants and half-educated political agitators from the countryside and small towns, were too naïve to understand the reality. Moreover, the rich dividends from the nationalized industries and financial institutions for them, acquired in the name of socialism, were too lucrative to lose. The collective failure of the Awami leadership also concerned its failure to grasp the implications of discarding the Islamic character of the polity. One may point out the way the Mujib government replaced a Quranic inscription, "Read in the name of thy Lord," with "Knowledge is Light" from the emblem of Dhaka University. In hindsight, one may mention how the Communist Party, stigmatized as the promoter of a "Godless" and "un-Islamic" order, failed to break through in the peasant and worker fronts in the 1940s and afterwards. We know how the bulk of Bengali Muslims, including peasants and workers, whole-heartedly supported the Muslim separatist Pakistan movement in the 1940s. Sheikh Mujib and his over-enthusiastic associates were not clear about how to implement socialism and secularism in Muslim majority Bangladesh, where most of the population were both religious and in favor of private property. The people had never been prepared to work for these alien concepts during the Liberation War. It seems they fought for independence, not for secularism and socialism.

17. Hashmi, "Islam in Bangladesh Politics," 110–13.

The subsequent governments gradually leaned toward the oil-rich Muslim countries of the Middle East and the West for the sake of sustained growth and legitimacy. Significantly, the Saudi recognition of Bangladesh came only after the assassination and overthrow of Sheikh Mujib. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's transformation into a quasi-Islamic state by discarding socialism and secularism went unhindered because the West, especially the United States, preferred pro-Western Islamists to pro-Communist social democrats during the peak of the Cold War in the 1980s. Meanwhile, President (General) Zia amended the constitution, replacing socialism and secularism with "social justice" and "absolute faith in God almighty," respectively. He also had "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful" (in Arabic) inserted at the beginning of the constitution.<sup>18</sup>

### **Political Islam, Military Rule and Legitimacy**

IN MAY 1981, ZIA DIED in an abortive military takeover. In March 1982, General Ershad, the army chief, toppled the successive, elected government. Ershad had neither the charisma nor the popularity of Zia, and is widely known for his promiscuity and unbridled corruption. Consequently, with a view to legitimizing his rule, in June 1988 he amended the constitution by introducing Islam as the state religion. It may be mentioned that with a few exceptions, most Muslim countries have this constitutional provision, including the secular countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Tunisia.<sup>19</sup>

However, one may argue that Ershad, of all people, could not be sincere about his commitment to Islam. He played the Islamic card for the sake of containing the so-called fundamentalist forces and his secular opponents by legitimizing his rule among the majority of Bangladeshi Muslims who, according to one study, favor non-cleric, English-educated, "anti-Indian" and Islam-oriented politicians as their leaders.<sup>20</sup> Ershad introduced the *Zakat* Fund to raise poor-tax in accordance with the teachings of Islam. He also declared Friday as the weekly holiday and frequently visited mosques, shrines and the

18. "The Proclamation [Amendment] Order, 1977," *Bangladesh Observer*, 23 April 1977.

19. Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Bangladesh Politics: Secular and Islamic Trends," in S. R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain, eds., *Bangladesh: History and Culture, Vol. I* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1986), 46.

20. Razia Akter Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), chap. 9.

Muslim holy places in Mecca and Medina. Ershad played the “India card” quite well. After having some diplomatic problem with India in 1982, he bitterly criticized India for the construction of the Farakka barrage across the Ganges and told his people: “It is being said today that if we do not get water from Farakka the northern and southern regions of Bangladesh will turn into deserts. *I want to remind everybody concerned that Islam was born in a desert, but Islam did not die. Islam could not be destroyed.*”<sup>21</sup>

As Ershad failed to legitimize his rule through popular support, he befriended some influential pirs, those of Atrashi, Charmonai and Sarsina, for example, and some Anglo-Mohammedan leaders who congratulated him for the State Religion Act. However, the Jamaat-i-Islami and pro-Iranian Maulana Mohammadullah (Hafizjee Huzur), an influential cleric, challenging Ershad’s legitimacy, condemned the act as an inadequate sham. However, some obscure Islamic groups and quite surprisingly, the Bangladesh Teachers’ Federation, supposed to be secular, favored the act. Curiously, Anglo-Mohammedan Kazi Qader (Muslim League leader) felt the act was aimed at suppressing the movement of the God-fearing Muslims. He demanded the immediate declaration of Bangladesh as an “Islamic Republic.”<sup>22</sup> However, whatever he did in the name of Islamization of the polity has remained unaltered.

Although various feminist and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) bitterly criticized the State Religion Act in Bangladesh, most of the Bengali Muslims have accepted the provision. So far no subsequent government has gathered enough courage to alter the amendment. Two women’s organizations, Naripakhyo and Oikyobaddho Nari Samaj, came forward to protest against the act. In doing so, they stoked the issues of “sovereignty of the country” and “the spirit of the Freedom Struggle,” presumed to be in danger because of the act. However, many men jeered at them for holding rallies, asking them to observe *purdah* (seclusion of women from public view), presumed to be a requirement by Muslim women. Many men were even happy about an Islamic State of Bangladesh where women would not compete with them in the job market.<sup>23</sup>

21. Maniruzzaman, “Bangladesh Politics,” 71.

22. Hashmi, “Islam in Bangladesh Politics,” 114–16.

23. *Holiday* (Bangladeshi weekly), 18 April 1988; *Sangbad* (Bengali daily), 17 April 1988.



Not long after the enactment of the State Religion Act, several liberal democrats and women's organizations started a campaign to rekindle the "Spirit of the Liberation War" or secularism to contain Ershad's autocracy. Several NGOs, funded by overseas donors, came forward in support. After failing to repeal the act, a section of left-oriented intellectuals, under the leadership of Ahmed Sharif, a retired Dhaka University professor, and retired Colonel Nuruzzaman (Freedom Fighter) lent support to the anti-Ershad movement. Under the banner of the *Muktijuddho Chetona Bikash Kendro* (Centre for the Development of the Spirit of the Liberation War), they spoke at some of the women's rallies. Stressing the virtues of democracy, socialism and secularism, Ahmed Sharif felt that "food in stomach is Islam" and urged that "the right to be fed be incorporated in the Constitution" instead of Islam as the state religion.<sup>24</sup> While the various Islamic groups, including the Jamaat-i-Islami, condemned Ershad as an "Indo-Soviet agent and enemy of Islam," they did not join hands with the secular, socialist and liberal democrats, let alone the women's groups. The latter had been avowedly anti-Jamaat for its "fundamentalist" tilt and collaboration with Pakistani rulers in 1971. They turned their attention to discredit the various collaborators of the Pakistani occupation forces in 1971 as the "enemies of the people." Meanwhile, by the late 1980s, a Bengali book had come out in the market with a long list of the "killers and collaborators of 1971." The polity since then has been sharply polarized between the so-called "pro-" and "anti-Liberation" forces. The former represents the so-called secular and liberal parties and individuals who are soft on India and harsh on Pakistan. The latter, the so-called "Islam-loving" groups and individuals, have strong to very strong anti-India and pro-Islam commitments. Although many of these groups and individuals had soft corners for Pakistan during the Liberation War of 1971, they also raise the "Liberation-in-danger" slogan, along with the age-old "Islam-in-danger." While the secular groups, by "Liberation-in-danger" mean the alleged Pakistani machination to subjugate Bangladesh, to the latter, the independence is at stake because of Indian "expansionism." Roughly, the Awami League and its secular allies represent the former while the BNP and its Islamic allies are with the latter.

The parliamentary elections of 1991, held after the overthrow of Ershad in December 1990, contrary to the expectations of the Awami

24. Ibid.

League, brought Khaleda Zia, the widow of President Zia, to power. Her party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) came to power with the support of the Jamaat-i-Islami and she became the prime minister. It is interesting that most political parties, including the Communist Party of Bangladesh, used Islamic slogans for their success in the elections of 1991. While the "Islam-loving" parties, got 54.13 percent of the votes, the Awami League-led Eight-Party alliance, despite its Islamic rhetoric, slogans and banners, managed to poll only around 34.81 percent of the votes in the elections.<sup>25</sup> One may again deduct more than 10 percent minority (mainly Hindu) votes from the total votes polled by the Awami League-led alliance, as traditionally the minorities have been voting for the Awami League. This means that in 1991, around 75 percent of Bangladeshi Muslims did not vote for the Awami League.

### **The Jamaat-i-Islami Factor**

THE JAMAAT-I-ISLAMI CAME INTO BEING in the 1940s in north India. Maulana Maaddudi, the founder, who had earlier strongly opposed the concept of Pakistan, later migrated to Pakistan from north India and worked for the establishment of an Islamic state, based on the shari'a law. The Jamaat throughout the Cold War maintained a pro-Western and anti-Communist policy. The party collaborated with the Pakistani occupation army in Bangladesh and is despised by many liberal democrats and others for its role in 1971. Not long after the overthrow of the Mujib government in 1975, the Jamaat emerged as a legitimate organization in Bangladesh. Unlike its counterparts in India and Pakistan, the Jamaat in Bangladesh is led and followed mostly by upper peasants and lower middle classes. It is widely believed that the Jamaat, having several NGOs, clinics and charitable organizations across Bangladesh, has been gaining ground, emerging as an alternative to the secular organizations.<sup>26</sup> Of late, sections of the Jamaat

25. Hashmi, "Islam in Bangladesh Politics," 125–27.

26. Zohair Hossain, "Maulana Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi: An Appraisal of His Thought and Political Influence," *South Asia* 9, no. 1 (June 1986); M. S. Agwani, "God's Government: Jamaat-i-Islami of India" and R. A. Banu, "Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh," in Mutalib and Hashmi, *Islam, Muslims and the Modern State*, Professor Ahmed Sharif, telephone conversation with author, Melbourne, Australia, 15 June 1994.

workers have adopted an anti-U.S. stand, especially in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. Throughout the Cold War, the United States had a soft corner for the Jamaat and similar Islamic parties elsewhere, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Due to political repression and lack of any democratic outlet in Egypt and in some other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, grass-roots-based Islamic parties have been clandestine militant organizations. In the post-Cold War era, U.S. indifference and hostility toward the hitherto friendly Islamic parties for their anti-Israel/anti-U.S. policy, turned them into anti-U.S. By the early 1990s, several militant splinter groups, mainly representing the unemployed/underemployed Muslim youths, emerged out of the powerful Muslim Brotherhood. The likelihood of such a transformation of the Jamaat in Bangladesh cannot be totally ruled out, either.

Although the Jamaat had faced a three-pronged attack from the Ershad government, “secular/socialist/liberal” groups, and as mentioned earlier, by a section of the orthodox ulema, mostly belonging to the conservative Deoband School, the party was gaining ground. While the “secular/liberal” groups condemn the Jamaat for its obscurantism and “war crimes,” a section of the ulema regard Maulana Mauddudi, the founder, a heretic and the Jamaat a heresy. The 1980s through the early 1990s had been the golden era for the Jamaat. By then their student wing had captured student unions at Chittagong and Rajshahi universities by defeating the combined groups of their opponents. This was the period when the party enjoyed the blessings of Saudi Arabia and, most importantly, the United States.<sup>27</sup> The Jamaat cut a good figure in the parliamentary elections of 1991—capturing eighteen seats and more than 12 percent of the votes (more than four million votes)—compared to ten seats and slightly more than a million votes in the elections of 1986.<sup>28</sup>

The emergence of the Jamaat as the third-largest party in terms of its share in total votes cast in the 1991 elections alarmed its rivals. In March 1992, the proponents of the Spirit of the Liberation War, under the leadership of Colonel (retired) Nuruzzaman (with the

27. Hashmi, “Islam in Bangladesh Politics,” 120–22.

28. Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh, *Bulletin: Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh* (Dhaka: April 1991), 8.

blessings of Ahmed Sharif) organized a “public trial” of Jamaat leader, Ghulam Azam, an alleged war criminal, for his active collaboration with Pakistan during the Liberation War. No sooner had Ghulam Azam been elected as the chief of the Jamaat in Bangladesh, than the organizers of the “trial” formed the Killer-Collaborator Elimination Committee (*Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul*). Promptly, the Awami League lent support to the Elimination Committee. Obviously, as some analysts observe, they did so to gain political leverage.<sup>29</sup> The “trial” was embarrassing both for the Jamaat and its allies, the BNP government. Curiously, the Awami League, which had earlier supported the physical attack on Jamaat leader, Matiur Rahman Nizami, by some Dhaka University students in May 1991, later asked the Jamaat leaders to “forget the past and look forward to the future.” And in early 1991, the party had no qualms about sending its presidential candidate to Ghulam Azam for his “blessings,” as the members of the parliament elect the president of the Republic. The Jamaat then had twenty members in the parliament with unflinching loyalty toward Ghulam Azam.<sup>30</sup>

Islamists in Bangladesh also started facing a hostile West not long after the Gulf War of 1991. The West must not have relished the way a large number of Bangladeshi Muslims, including leading politicians from the so-called liberal democratic parties like BNP and Awami League, had expressed solidarity with Saddam Hussein. Some candidates during the parliamentary elections of 1991 even identified themselves as “Saddam’s candidates,” displaying life-size portraits of the Iraqi dictator.<sup>31</sup> The Jamaat, however, opposed Saddam Hussein’s Kuwait invasion, which, according to a Jamaat leader, cost them dearly as most Bangladeshi Muslims were supporters of Saddam and bitter critics of the West.<sup>32</sup> However, the Jamaat’s poor performance in all the previous and successive elections belies this assertion. Nevertheless, the fact remains that by the 1990s the Jamaat had not only regained its lost image (despite its anti-Liberation role in 1971) but also started playing the role of “king maker,” as evident from the

29. Badruddin Umar, “Why Has Ghulam Azam’s Trial Emerged as an Issue? [in Bengali],” *Ajker Kagaj* (Bengali daily), 1 April 1992.

30. Jamaat-i-Islami, “Nizami Analyzes Election Results,” *Bulletin*, 7.

31. Hashmi, “Islam in Bangladesh Politics,” 127.

32. Jamaat-i-Islami, “Election Results,” 7.

results of the parliamentary elections since 1991 vis-à-vis the formation of government by the two major political parties, BNP and the Awami League.

The late 1980s and early 1990s also witnessed the gradual transformation of the cold war between the Islamists (mainly the Jamaat) and the so-called secular/liberal forces into open confrontation. The latter, the “pro-India” and “pro-Western” lobbies, respectively, represent the Awami League (and its allies belonging to the erstwhile pro-Soviet political parties) and the various NGOs/ human rights groups. They have been opposing the Jamaat in the name of championing the cause of Liberation, women’s rights, human rights, minority rights and secularism. The Taslima Nasrin episode, the NGO-mullah conflict and the mutual mud-slinging between the mullah and Awami-NGO lobbies are parts of the play called the “Public Trial of Ghulam Azam” in 1991. While the mullah have been vilifying the Awami-NGO lobby as the “enemies of Islam,” “Indian agents” and “agents of neo-imperialism,” the latter have been portraying the former as “anti-Liberation/Pakistani agents,” “fundamentalist/Taliban” and “Communal” (anti-Hindu and anti-minority fascist). One may cite scores of scurrilous writings against the so-called Islamic fundamentalist-cum-communal forces, especially the Jamaat.<sup>33</sup> The “secular/liberal” group owns most of the well-circulated Bengali and English newspapers in the country. The Reliance Group of India owns the well-circulated *Janakantha*.

Nothing could be more trite than portraying the Jamaat as “communal” and “anti-Liberation” in the post-Liberation period, let alone as pro-Taliban. Jimmy Carter felt that Islamic parties who believed in election, despite having “fundamentalist” belief and support for

33. Ahmed Sharif et al. (eds.), *Ekattarer Ghatak O Dalara Ke Kothay* (Bengali), Mukti Juddho Chetona Bikash Kendra, Dhaka, 1987; Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir, *Bangladeshe Jatiyatabad Ebong Moulobad* (Bengali), Agami Prakashani, Dhaka, 1993; Aman-ud-Daula, *Ghulam Azamer Nagarikatta Mamla* (Bengali), Dibya Prakash, Dhaka, 1993; Maulana Abdul Awwal, *Jamaater Asal Chehara* (Bengali), Agami Prakashani, Dhaka, 1993; Shahriyar Kabir (ed.), *Bangladeshe Shampradayikatar Chalchitra* (Bengali), Pallab Publishers, Dhaka, 1993; Shahriyar Kabir (ed.), *Ekattarer Ghatak Jamaat-i-Islami Atit O Bartaman* (Bengali), Mukti Juddho Chetona Bikash Kendra, Dhaka, 1989; Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, *Communal Discrimination in Bangladesh: Facts and Documents*, Dhaka, 1993; Taslima Nasrin, *Lajja* (Bengali), Pearl Publishers, Dhaka, 1993; and *Lajja: Shame*, Penguin Books, London, 1994.

shari'a law, could not be classified as "extremist."<sup>34</sup> And those among them who have accepted the reality of Bangladesh cannot be simply rejected as anti-Liberation, either. Nevertheless, the fact remains that some powerful Jamaat leaders do not believe in the democratic way of coming to power—some of them do not rule out the adoption of the "other means," or armed insurrection, to capture power.<sup>35</sup> Jamaat workers' militancy and their occasional armed encounters with "liberal democrats" (mainly the Awami Leaguers) have alarmed many about an eventual Jamaat takeover of the country. Many Bangladeshi intellectuals feel that the BNP-Jamaat coalition government that came to power in October 2001 has been too soft on the Jamaat. Even the government's 2002 banning of a movie, *Matir Moina*, for its negative portrayal of the madrasa system of education, is read by many not as a fear of the Awami League by the BNP, "but of Jamaat-i-Islami deserting BNP."<sup>36</sup>

## **Popular Islam, Fatwa, Women and NGOs in the Village Community**

THE WRITINGS AND COMMENTS by Taslima Nasrin (b. 1962), a medical doctor-turned-feminist writer, on Islam, patriarchy and society in Bangladesh in the early 1990s brought her (and eventually her country) to the limelight. Nasrin is another member of the so-called secular-liberal-democrat group of Bangladesh, reflecting her rabid anti-Islamic, pro-Indian and anti-male bias in her writings—both in literary works (often classified as soft porn) and essays. Already very controversial and unpopular both among Islamists and others in Bangladesh for advocating free sex and other maverick ideas, including the merger of Bangladesh with the Indian State of West Bengal, Nasrin endeared many Indians. In early 1993, for her fiction, *Lajja*, which portrays the plight of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh—paradoxically in the wake of the killing of thousands of Muslims in India during and after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in late 1992—Nasrin became very popular among Hindu militants in India. This

34. *Daily Star*, 5 August 2001.

35. Maulana Abbas Ali Khan (acting chief of the Jamaat), interview with author, Dhaka, 21 May 1991.

36. Afsan Chowdhury, "Is 'Islam in danger' Slogan Back in Circulation?" *Daily Star*, 21 May 2002.

novelette, soon translated into English and several other Indian languages, grossly exaggerated the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh by singling out the Jamaat-i-Islami workers as members of the killer-rapist-abductor gangs.<sup>37</sup> Not long after the publication of *Lajja*, a couple of obscure mullahs from the periphery issued the so-called *fatwa-to-kill* against the author. Soon, they denied having issued such a fatwa. Despite their denial, the Indian and Western media publicized the so-called death threat portraying Bangladesh as another “Islamic” country with all its negative attributes, turning Nasrin into their Salman Rushdie and the two mullahs into the protégé of Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>38</sup> Nasrin’s alleged remarks made to Indian media in 1994 suggesting to “rewrite the Quran” enraged the bulk of the Bangladeshi Muslims, and this finally led to her expulsion from the country. The wide coverage of the Taslima Nasrin episode in Indian and Western media has convinced many that Bangladesh is not different from other “Islamic” countries vis-à-vis their intolerance and obscurantism.

While the Taslima Nasrin episode was drawing world attention, persecution of rural women in the name of Islamic justice was occurring in the countryside. The cruel and illegal acts of the traditional village courts, or *salish*, was very disturbing to human rights activists and others. The public trial of poor women by village elders and mullahs, which led to several deaths of the victims, convinced many in the West and elsewhere about the “impending” ascendancy of the Islamic extremists to power in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the proliferation of Western donors aided NGOs in the country, who have been advancing micro-credit to rural women (albeit at very high interest rates, the average being around 32 percent), running schools and generating jobs, mainly for women, polarized the polity between pro- and anti-NGO groups. Broadly, the former represents the so-called secular-liberal-democrat people (often the beneficiaries of the NGOs) and the latter mainly Islam-oriented and anti-West/anti-globalization groups and individuals. The controversial and extortionist modus operandi of NGOs, especially the way the Grameen Bank, BRAC and Proshika

37. Taslima Nasrin, *Lajja: Shame* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

38. Hashmi, “Women and Islam: Taslima Nasreen, Society and Politics in Bangladesh,” *South Asia* 18, no. 2 (December 1995); Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*, chap. 6.

operate, preferring women to men as their clients in the name of female empowerment and alleviation of poverty, has alienated village elders and others from the NGOs. In the common parlance of the villagers, the various powerful local and foreign NGOs are described as: “*CAREer gari, BRACer bari, Grameener nari, aar Proshikar barabari*” (CARE [An American NGO] is known for its vehicles, BRAC for its buildings, Grameen for its women and Proshika for its excesses). Purportedly, mullahs’ and village elders’ dislike for the NGOs was due to their “anti-Islamic” activities, including bringing women to the close proximity of unrelated men and for their alleged promotion of Christian missionaries. The conflict may be explained as another dimension of the age-old elite conflict between the dominant urban and weak rural elite. NGO preference for women to men as their clients has hit patriarchy and the well-entrenched village elders and mullahs by posing the threat of taking away their traditional clients as well. The NGO lobby’s projection of the mullahs as “fundamentalists,” “anti-women” and “anti-liberation” led to the proliferation of anti-NGO fatwas and backlash at NGO workers in the countryside. Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini, an influential cleric, in a public meeting demanded the execution of NGO activist Kazi Faruq Ahmed, for his “anti-Islamic” activities.<sup>39</sup>

The fatwa controversy came to the limelight in the 1990s after the local media, NGOs and donors took exception to the persecution of rural women in the name of Islam. Poor rural women, often victims of rape by influential villagers or those alleged to have cohabited with their former husbands after being divorced, are punished for committing adultery. Sometimes influential village elders force them to remarry someone as penance to committing adultery through the *salish*. The village mullah, totally dependent on village elders for sustenance, play the vital role in justifying the “judgments” in the name of *shari’a* law. In late 2000, one Shahida, a village woman at Naogaon district in northern Bangladesh, fell victim to a *salish* verdict and was forced to commit suicide. Wide publicity of the incident led to the High Court verdict declaring the dispensing of fatwas illegal on January 1, 2001.<sup>40</sup> The influential *Jamaat-i-Islami*, several Islamic groups and hundreds of *ulema* condemned the judgment as un-

39. *Daily Star*, 4 April 2001.

40. *Prothom Alo*, 2 January 2001.



Islamic and the judges as *murtads* (apostates).<sup>41</sup> While Maulana Fazlul Karim, the influential *pir* (Sufi) of Charmonai (avowedly opposed to the Jamaat and female leadership, and very soft on General Ershad), the chief of the Islamic Constitution Movement, condemned the judgment, Mufti Amini threatened to launch a “Taliban-style Revolution” in Bangladesh to counterpoise the “enemies of Islam.”<sup>42</sup> Islamic zealots were on the rampage at Brahmanbaria, Chittagong and certain other places, chanting anti-government and pro-Taliban slogans: “*Amra sabai Taliban, Bangla habe Afghan*” (We are all Taliban and will turn Bangladesh into another Afghanistan).<sup>43</sup> Although most liberal-democrats favored the anti-fatwa judgment, the government, being apprehensive of the backlash, was thinking in terms of reviewing the judgment.<sup>44</sup>

Soon the polarized polity witnessed the showdown between pro-fatwa clerics and anti-fatwa, pro-NGO *Nagorik Andolon* (Citizen’s Movement). Among others, the Pir of Charmonai, Mufti Amini and Mufti Azizul Haq, organized a grand pro-fatwa rally in Dhaka on February 2, 2001. Declaring the NGOs as “number one enemy” of Islam and Bangladesh, the clerics blamed the Awami League government for appointing judges with bias against Islam.<sup>45</sup> The pro-NGO and anti-fatwa *Nagorik Andolon* confronted the clerics and asked the government to ban all religiously motivated political parties.<sup>46</sup> Under quite confusing and mysterious circumstances, a police constable was killed inside a mosque at Muhammadpur in Dhaka. The government put the blame on a section of the clerics for the murder and also for possessing “time bombs,” said to have been recovered from a madrassa at Muhammadpur.<sup>47</sup> According to the government, Islamic militants killed the police constable while Shaykh-ul-Hadis Azizul Haq, the chief of the pro-BNP Islamic Unity Front, was present in the mosque. The government also claimed that the *Ulema Parishad* (Council of Clerics), an Islamic organization, had been collecting money for jihad. It produced a “receipt” for the collected amount

41. *Daily Star*, January 2, 3 and 4, 2001.

42. *Janakantha & Jugantar* (Bengali dailies), 6 January 2001.

43. *Prothom Alo*, 6 February 2001.

44. *Ibid.*, 9 January 2001.

45. *Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, 3 February 2001.

46. *Holiday*, 9 February 2001.

47. *Prothom Alo*, 4 February 2001.

from a madrasa at Muhammadpur. In view of the prevalent situation, while the Awami League has been trying to single out the rival Islamists and BNP as pro-Taliban terrorists and the BNP has been singling out the former as opportunist, one may not take the “evidence” seriously.<sup>48</sup> The government version of the murder of the policeman in the mosque lacks credibility as well. Haji Mackbul Ahmed, an Awami League MP and local godfather, was too powerful and influential to be overpowered by a handful of clerics and madrasa students.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, the government was considering the formation of a Shari’a Board to issue fatwas in accordance with Islam and on behalf of the state.<sup>50</sup> Liberal democrats and leftists opposed any such move to institutionalize fatwa through the state machinery.<sup>51</sup> However, one may set aside the liberal-democrats’ reservations about the mullahs’ authority to issue fatwas as they represent the minority view, mainly belonging to the urban middle and upper classes. The acceptability of the fatwa-dispensing mullahs in the countryside is reflected in several violent incidents. In January 2001, villagers at Nandigram in Bogra district, for example, damaged the vehicle of a Bangladesh Television crew, who went to interview one Maulana Ibrahim, who in 1995 came to the limelight for his famous anti-BRAC fatwa stirring up a big mob against the NGO. Most villagers were in favor of the cleric and regarded the TV crew as pro-NGO.<sup>52</sup>

The Muslim community at the grassroots level favors fatwa as the fastest and cheapest way of getting justice. The average mullah’s revulsion for NGOs is well taken by Bangladeshi Muslims at the grassroots level as well. This is reflected in the popularity of scores of mullah-cum-demagogue, including Maulana Delwar Hussein Saidi (a Jamaat MP since 1996), Pir Fazlul Karim, Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini and Mufti Ubaidullah and others. Saidi’s video and audiocassettes containing rustic speeches and extreme views, reflecting the little traditions of Islam in Bangladesh, sell by the thousand throughout the country.<sup>53</sup> One year after the controversial anti-fatwa judgment, Saidi felt that

48. *Daily Star*, 5 February 2001.

49. *Holiday*, 20 April 2001.

50. *Prothom Alo*, 15 February 2001.

51. *Ibid.*, 18 February 2001.

52. *Ibid.*, 14 January 2001.

53. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*, 88–89.

“fatwas should guide the judiciary and not the other way round.”<sup>54</sup> On February 6, 2002 some clerics commemorated the deaths of several Islamic activists who died in police firing protesting the anti-fatwa judgment in 2001.<sup>55</sup> Bengali Muslim support for the mullah is well reflected in some popular Bengali songs, played by taxi drivers and others at the grassroots level. One such song depicts the plight of the under-employed madrasa graduates and their prejudice against women and modernization: “What is the use of studying the Quran and Hadis at the madrassas if they are obsolete in the courts of law? What is so great about being a man if the country is under female leadership? What is the benefit of manhood if the universities in the name of coeducation promote lewdness?”<sup>56</sup>

### **Islamic Militancy: Real or Imaginary?**

MEANWHILE, URBAN MULLAHS with rural backgrounds and links have been campaigning against the NGOs and their urban patrons and associates, mainly professionals and intellectuals, often portraying them as murtads, enemies of Islam and agents of neo-imperialist West.<sup>57</sup> And as per Islamic law, apostates are liable to capital punishment. Death warrants and bomb attacks on some of the enlisted murtads presumably by Islamic militants became quite common during 1991 and 2001. The ongoing conflict between the pro-NGO “civil society” and the anti-NGO Islamists in early 2001 alarmed the U.S. State Department and various donor agencies, including the Asian Development Bank. Pointing out its adverse effects on the economy of Bangladesh, they condemned the “violation of human rights” in the name of Islam.<sup>58</sup>

While celebrating the Bengali New Year—an “un-Islamic” festival to some Muslim clerics—on April 14, 2001, a bomb killed several people at Ramna Park in Dhaka. In June, a village church was bombed at Gopalganj (Sheikh Hasina’s home district) and soon the police arrested one Mufti Hannan, the alleged mastermind. The police also arrested four madrasa teachers for their alleged involvement in the

54. *Jai Jai Din* (Bengali weekly), 15 January 2002.

55. *Prothom Alo*, 7 February 2002.

56. *Jai Jai Din*, 15 January 2002.

57. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*, 204.

58. *Dainik Dinkal* (Bengali daily), 28 February 2001; *Holiday*, 2 March 2001.

Ramna Park bombing. However, the Hasina government lost credibility for producing contradictory stories and evidence with regard to the bombing.<sup>59</sup> Yet from another newspaper report we learn about the *Harkatul Jihad*, an “Islamic militant” group, said to have been engaged in terrorist activities in parts of Chittagong district in association with several Rohingya Muslim militant organizations from Arakan, Myanmar. The previous governments up to 1996 (prior to the formation of the Awami League government under Hasina) allegedly armed these groups who aim at capturing state power.<sup>60</sup> One has to be too naïve to believe the story. As discussed earlier, during the fracas between the pro- and anti-fatwa groups in 2001, some mullahs threatened to stage a “Taliban-style revolution in Bangladesh.” The rhetoric, wishful thinking and verbal attacks on secular law and institutions do not prove anything. Despite the sensational reporting by a section of the press, hinting at the “impending” collapse of law and order, one does not get any conclusive evidence about the so-called Taliban activities in Bangladesh. The following reports may be cited in this regard:

One Muhammad Yaqub, a “Taliban militant,” who had been to Saudi Arabia as an expatriate worker and trained in Afghanistan, was arrested in Chittagong.<sup>61</sup> Members of the Shahadat-i-al-Hikma [hitherto unheard of], a pro-Taliban “martyrs’ organization,” pasted posters at different places in Rajshahi, including the University campus, exhorting Muslims to learn “the proper use of arms.” Syed Kausar Hussein, the chief of the group, who had been to Saudi Arabia as an expatriate worker, was trained in Afghanistan. According to the police, the posters reached Rajshahi from Dhaka. Hussein is a former *madrasah* student and used to run a small business in Rajshahi.<sup>62</sup>

A cover story by the *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)* in April 2002 is another reflection of this alarmist view.<sup>63</sup> The *FEER* story does not comfort the liberal democrats and secular people. According to Bertil Lintner, the Thailand-based Swedish journalist: “A revolution

59. *Prothom Alo*, June 9 and 10, 2001; *Daily Star*, 15 June 2001.

60. *Azadi* (Bengali daily), 20 June 2001.

61. *Prothom Alo*, 12 January 2001.

62. *Ibid.*, 24 April 2001.

63. “Beware of Bangladesh—Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 April 2002.

is taking place in Bangladesh that threatens trouble for the region and beyond if left unchallenged. Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups, a powerful military with ties to the militants, the mushrooming of Islamic schools churning out radical students, middle class apathy, poverty and lawlessness—all are combining to transform the nation.” The report also suggested that Western donors and diplomats, more concerned with the problems of governance and development than the rise of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh “seem to have paid scant attention to the deeper long-term danger” of Islamic resurgence in the country. Citing the indifference and complacency of the Bangladeshi middle classes and government about the “impending threat” of Talibanization of the polity, the report considers the electoral success of the Jamaat-i-Islami, having seventeen seats in the three-hundred-member parliament and two ministers in the cabinet of the BNP-led coalition government, ominous. According to the report, more extremist Islamic clerics and groups in Bangladesh, such as Maulana Ubaidul Haq and the “shadowy” Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, having connections with their Pakistani, Afghan, Chechen, and Southeast Asian counterparts with the blessings from Osama bin Laden, have been active in the region. The January 22, 2002 attack on the American Cultural Centre in Kolkata has been imputed to Harkat gunmen. The report cited how Jamaat supporters in general and Ubaidul Haq in particular took part in anti-U.S. protests during the Afghan War in late 2001. According to the report, while addressing thousands of Muslims—including the President and several cabinet ministers of Bangladesh at the Eid congregational prayer in Dhaka in December 2001—the latter publicly condemned the U.S. president as “the most heinous terrorist in the world.” “America and Bush must be destroyed. The Americans will be washed away if Bangladesh’s 120 million Muslims spit on them,” the cleric exhorted. Several local newspaper reports are corroborative of the reported speech.<sup>64</sup>

It seems the report has nothing to do with reality. One is not sure if there is any hidden agenda of individuals or groups behind such reporting. Soon after the excerption of the Internet version of the story in local newspapers, the BNP-Jamaat coalition government

64. *Prothom Alo*, 20 December 2001.

under Khaleda Zia condemned the report as baseless, imposing a ban on the circulation of the April 4 issue of the periodical in Bangladesh. However, no sooner had Sheikh Hasina of the opposition Awami League blamed the BNP-Jamaat coalition government for the “prevalent terrorist image” of Bangladesh than Prime Minister Khaleda Zia blamed Hasina’s party for “planting” the *FEER* story.<sup>65</sup> A similar sensational report came out in the *Wall Street Journal* (April 2, 2002) entitled, “In Bangladesh, as in Pakistan, a Worrisome Rise in Islamic Extremism.” “Militant groups with links with international terrorists” and “powerful military with ties to militants” are said to have mobilized Islamic militants in the country. One wonders if there is a link between such sensational writings and what Sheikh Hasina and her party have been doing, i.e., vilifying the BNP and its allies as “Islamic fundamentalists” and as local agents of Osama bin Laden. Curiously, the report portrays the Awami League as “left-leaning and secular,” ignoring how the party since the early 1990s has been projecting itself as a champion of Islam and how Sheikh Hasina donned the Islamic *hijab* on the eve of the 1996 parliamentary elections and became the prime minister. The pro-Awami League sympathy of the reporter is further reflected in his corroboration of Sheikh Hasina that the BNP-led coalition government, which came to power after “ousting,” not “defeating” the Awami League, has established “a reign of terror across the country.” The reporter blamed the BNP-led government as “anti-Hindu” and “pro-fundamentalist.” It is curious that he blamed the Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami behind the threats against Taslima Nasrin in 1993 and for “the attempted murder” of popular poet Shamsur Rahman in 1999. One has every reason to agree with Enayetullah Khan, the editor of weekly *Holiday*, that the so-called attack on the poet was a sham and that he has “lost his face as a tool of propaganda.” Khan points out Bertil Lintner’s “Indian connection” for embellishing his article “with Indian intelligence quotes as credible evidence of the Harkat-ul-Jihad nexus between Pakistan and Bangladesh through the intermediation of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan.”<sup>66</sup>

65. *Ibid.*, 4 April 2002; *Daily Star*, April 4, 11 and 12, 2002.

66. “O Secularism!” *Holiday*, 5 April 2002.

It is interesting that while the BNP-led government sued the *FEER* for damages to the tune of one billion dollars for tarnishing the country's image,<sup>67</sup> liberal democrats and the media also condemned the *FEER* reports for their anti-Bangladesh stand. The *Daily Star* of Bangladesh (a "liberal democrat" daily, soft on the Awami League) in an editorial mentions "regular and credible elections," the freedom of expression, the existence of private TV channels, women's impressive turnout in elections, the rise in the literacy rate, women's representation in the armed forces and their gradual empowerment process in Bangladesh to portray a liberal democratic image of Bangladesh. The editor considers the *FEER* article prejudiced, one-sided and highly irresponsible.<sup>68</sup> The countrywide condemnation of the article (with the exception of the Awami League corroborating the story) was soon followed by its rebuttal by foreign reporters, diplomats and others familiar with Bangladesh. According to Philip Bowring, former editor of the *FEER*, Western "Islam-bashers" have been responsible for this type of "media demonization of Islamic nations." He blames the avidly pro-U.S. Dow Jones, who owns the periodical, for the sensational story, in line with the Western media in the wake of 9/11. "For sure, some nasty extremists do exist in this as in all other countries, but the nation's secular polity and the precedence of Bengali over Islamic identity is rooted in its independent history," Bowring reiterates. To him, there is no point in going after the "make-believe enemies" in countries like Bangladesh, as the real terrorists live elsewhere, including some of the major Western cities. Bowring is critical of alienating hundreds of millions of Muslims, whom he thinks "are far more moderate than Christian fundamentalist zealots such as Attorney General John Ashcroft in the Bush government."<sup>69</sup> Among several Western observers, Mary Anne Peters, U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh, was very critical of the *FEER* and the *Wall Street Journal* for publishing such biased articles on Bangladesh, "a liberal Muslim" nation. She felt that investigation was essential to find out the truth behind the story.<sup>70</sup>

67. Ibid.

68. "FEER's Prejudiced and One-sided Cover Story," *Daily Star*, 5 April 2002.

69. "West's Islam-bashers Playing into bin Laden's Hands," cited in *Holiday*, 12 April 2002; *Daily Star*, 16 April 2002.

70. *Daily Star*, 14 April 2002.

Despite such claims by Sheikh Hasina and other Awami League leaders, in tune with the *FEER* report that there are Taliban elements in the country and in the BNP-led coalition government formed in October 2001, the allegations do not make any sense, as the Jamaat-i-Islami is not a pro-Taliban organization at all. To Hasina, two cabinet ministers belonging to the Jamaat and one of her contenders in the election represent the Taliban. She told this to a BBC reporter in the United States. Another Awami League leader, former foreign minister Abdus Samad Azad, told the same thing to the visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Dhaka.<sup>71</sup> And the BNP cannot be singled out as an ally of the Jamaat. The Jamaat and Awami League were together against the BNP government of 1991–96.

## Conclusions

THE MUTUAL VILIFICATION of the two parties indicates how the country is sharply polarized between the pro- and anti-Awami League camps, the former representing “liberal democracy” and “pro-liberation forces” and the latter, “pro-Islam” and “anti-Indian” viewpoints. The Awami League tries to get dividends by projecting the BNP as “anti-liberation” for its electoral alliance with the Jamaat, which actively collaborated with the Pakistani occupation forces in 1971.

It seems the circulation of an English booklet on the eve of President Clinton’s trip to Bangladesh in March 2000 by the Awami League government was another attempt to vilify the BNP-led opposition group as “Islamic terrorist,” a *bête noire* to the United States. It was also an attempt to establish the Awami League as the only liberal democratic alternative in the country. The booklet contained sensational information about the “impending threat” of terrorist attacks on Clinton by Islamic militants. One is not sure if this led to the cancellation of the president’s scheduled trip to a village around 30 kilometers off Dhaka to meet female members of a local NGO. It is also widely believed that the Awami League government resorted to the same trick immediately after September 11 (on the eve of the parliamentary elections of October 2001) by pasting posters on city walls in Dhaka, portraying BNP leaders as “pro-Taliban,” “friends” of

71. *Prothom Alo*, January 1 and 5, 2001.



Osama bin Laden. And as we know, both major parties of Bangladesh adopt expedient slogans and policies for the sake of power. As the Awami League has no qualms about using the Islamic card for political leverage, so is the rival BNP, which does not hesitate to portray it as the champion of liberal democracy and nationalism. Despite championing the cause of democracy, the Awami League did not accept electoral defeats in 1991 and 2001 parliamentary elections gracefully. While Sheikh Hasina imputed the 1991 defeat to a “subtle rigging” by the rival BNP and its “Islamic” allies, to her, the BNP victory in 2001 was possible because of the “crude rigging” by the “anti-liberation” forces. With a view to tarnishing the image of the BNP and its Islamist allies, especially among the Western donors, in early June 2002, the pro-Awami League Centre for Research and Information published a book, *A Rigged Election, An Illegitimate Government: Bangladesh Election 2001*. It is noteworthy that both the elections were held under caretaker governments under the supervision of international poll observers. However, nothing would be more simplistic than explaining the rise of Islamism as a mere by-product of the perennial conflict between the Awami League and its adversaries.

As indicated in the *FEER* report, one does not totally reject the presence of Islamic militants, fanatics, “fundamentalists” and even pro-Taliban activists in the country. In the changed post-Cold War environment of globalization and market economy, which is forcing the less developed countries (LDCs) like Bangladesh to adopt World Bank and IMF recommendations—at the cost of the poor and under-employed beneficiaries of state subsidies and welfare—Islamism has been emerging as an alternative order. Very similar to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Algeria and Egypt, among other Muslim countries, the Bangladesh polity has been divided between the Western and “vernacular elite,” to paraphrase Oliver Roy;<sup>72</sup> the latter representing the underdogs, forced to adopt alternative ideologies for the sake of survival. During the Cold War, socialism, nationalism and separatist ideologies had been quite handy as alternatives to “Neo-Colonialism,” said to be the root of all evils. Curiously, the West, especially the United States, during the Cold War promoted Islamism in various

72. Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), passim.

countries including Egypt, Pakistan and Afghanistan to counterpoise communism. Leaders belonging to the upper classes often espoused radical ideas in the name of establishing the Islamic welfare state. Some Muslim leaders, such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Nur Muhammad Taraki, Ben Bella, Nasser and Mujib for example, promoted “national socialism” as their version of the welfare state. In the post-Cold War era, Islamism has replaced the earlier doctrines with certain modifications—though retaining the same mass appeal—to empower the underdogs representing the peasantry (and/or tribes) and the “vernacular elite” from the lower middle classes.

While in Iran and Afghanistan the well-entrenched mullah, in the absence of strong middle classes and modern institutions, succeeded in installing themselves to power (in both the cases with mass support), things are not that smooth for the Bangladeshi mullah. However, one finds striking similarities between pre-revolutionary Iran and Bangladesh since its inception in 1971. In Iran, during the Allied occupation in the 1940s, impoverished rural masses moved to the cities. In the 1960s, there was a further influx of peasants into the cities in the wake of the so-called “White Revolution of Reza Shah II.” Thus, Islam-oriented people with peasant ways of thinking outnumbered the pro-Shah, privileged and Westernized secular upper classes. These uprooted rural migrants had close links with the influential clergy and the countryside. And we may agree with V.S. Naipaul, that it takes more than one generation “to change a village way of thinking,” and that the sharply polarized population of the major cities in Iran, having no communication with each other, “were two tribes living in one country.”<sup>73</sup> Apart from the similarities between Iran and Bangladesh, especially with regard to the influx of conservative peasants into the urban areas, there are striking dissimilarities between the two. Unlike Iran under the Shah, Bangladesh has been far more tolerant, democratic and “Islamic.” Here the governments from time to time adopt and sponsor “Islamic” slogans and characters for the sake of legitimacy. The replacement of Persian “Khuda Hafiz” (God bless you) by Arabic (more acceptable to the puritans) “Allah Hafiz,” in government functions and media, for example, by the BNP-led coalition government in 2001, may be cited

73. V. S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), 257–58.

in this regard. It seems the major “liberal democratic” parties of Bangladesh have been competing against each other to prove their Islamic credentials.

Again, contrary to conventional wisdom, Islamism is no longer the monopoly of the mullah. In Bangladesh, the bulk of the Jamaat-i-Islami cadres, if not the leaders, are not madrassa-educated mullahs, but are from the various petty bourgeois classes representing the middle and poor peasantry, petty businessmen and shopkeepers, school teachers and other underemployed and unemployed classes.<sup>74</sup> Many of them can be classified as members of the peripheral “vernacular elite” or graduates from Bengali medium institutions—the least preferred in the private sector job market. They nourish a tremendous sense of deprivation and, like their Algerian, Egyptian and Iranian counterparts, have the potential to turn very violent and anarchical. And their madrassa-educated counterparts—even poorer and almost totally unemployable in both the public and private sectors other than in low-paid teaching positions or as employees of mosques—are also angry and frustrated with anything that goes in the name of secularism and modernism. Historically, the replacement of Hindu landed and professional elite in the wake of the Partition, non-Bengali elite after the Liberation of 1971, and of English-educated elite in the name of Bengali nationalism by the relatively inferior and unskilled people, has been responsible for social disorder, political chaos and economic mismanagement. The ongoing triangular conflict among modernists in line with globalization, Bengali nationalists and Islamists in the country is reflective of the situation.

While the well-organized Jamaat has been gaining legitimacy in the eyes of many—including Jimmy Carter—for adopting constitutional politics, a section of the mullahs, mainly the pro-establishment pirs and others without any firm base, has remained vacillating and opportunistic. They are very critical of the Jamaat as well. Pir Fazlul Karim of Charmonai, for example, on the one hand is critical of female leadership and of the Jamaat for lending support to female leadership (considering it un-Islamic), and on the other hand he extols the attributes of General Ershad, widely known for his corruption and promiscuity. “Despite all his faults, Ershad has two virtues—firstly, he is a

74. Razia Akter Banu, “Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh,” 84–95.

man; and secondly, he has formally repented for his sins,” so goes the eulogy.<sup>75</sup> The pir, among many other clerics, wants to withdraw female students from all schools in the country, especially those “who look older than their age.”<sup>76</sup> As one does not take these pirs, who have hardly any political leverage, seriously, so one does not give any credence to the non-cleric politicians with regard to their pro-Islamic rhetoric. G.M. Qader (Ershad’s brother), an MP from the Jatiya Party (Ershad Group), having very little influence on the people, for example, wanted to table a bill in parliament to make the saying of prayer five times a day obligatory for every Bangladeshi Muslim. Otherwise, he demanded, they should be jailed and liable to pay a hefty fine.<sup>77</sup> The mutual admiration of ultra-orthodox mullahs and sections of the Anglo-Mohammedan politicians, their advocacy of shari’a law and their tirade against the Jamaat are reflective of their desire to get political legitimacy by using Islam and setting aside the Jamaat. It seems radical Islamic rhetoric is their only way to make room for themselves in the political arena of Bangladesh. Otherwise, they know, it is next to impossible to dislodge the powerful BNP and Awami League to their advantage. The BNP and Awami League, on the other hand, use the Islamic card firstly to neutralize the Jamaat and secondly to appease the vast majority of God-fearing and anti-Indian Bengali Muslims for the sake of political legitimacy and leverage.

In sum, this study reveals that the people in general have lost faith in the prospect of a welfare state in Bangladesh. There is more or less a consensus among the educated people about corruption among their politicians and bureaucrats. It may be mentioned that in 2001, Transparency International found Bangladesh to be the most corrupt country out of ninety-one countries of the world.<sup>78</sup> Another study reveals that in the last thirty-odd years since independence, corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and their cronies have plundered around Taka 1,350 billion (approximately US\$30 billion) or about 75 percent of the total foreign aid received by the country.<sup>79</sup> Every now and then peo-

75. *Prothom Alo*, July 13 and 25, 2001; March 11 and 29, 2002.

76. *Jai Jai Din*, 1 January 2002.

77. *Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, 7 March 2002.

78. *Janakantha* and *Independent*, 28 June 2001.

79. Abul Barkat, “The Economy of Bangladesh in the Thirty Years of the Post-liberation Period: A Legacy of Failure in Human Development” [in Bengali], (paper presented at a seminar organized by the Bangladesh Itihas Parishad [History Society], Dhaka, 26 April 2002).

ple read in local newspapers about the hundreds of loan defaulters of the country who have borrowed billions of taka from local banks and have never returned the money. In view of the above, it is no wonder that millions of Bangladeshis have turned fatalist and escapist, taking refuge in religion. Their religiosity and inherent peasant culture are conducive to the growth of fatalism as well.<sup>80</sup>

Curiously, despite all the extortion, corruption and the consequential poverty and misery of the people, as reported by the BBC, a survey in 1999 portrayed the Bangladeshis to be “the happiest people on earth.” As we know, “the happiest people” have no reasons to take up arms or turn into Taliban for the sake of an Islamic revolution in Bangladesh. The “happiest people” of the country are actually part of the Third World poor, always in the state of “pathetic contentment” reflecting their pragmatism. And seemingly, there is no way out to experience growth, development and prosperity for the average Bangladeshi in the near future. According to the *Quarterly Economic Update* of the Asian Development Bank in the first quarter of 2002, about half of the population lives below the poverty line in Bangladesh, which would need forty-eight years to eradicate poverty at the existing growth rate of around 4 percent per year. The future seems to be quite bleak—the figures of 35 percent unemployed, and more than forty people vying for a single job, do not promise a rosy prospect for the country. The upshot has been the mass exodus of landless peasants to the urban areas, especially to Dhaka, the capital city.

To conclude, we may assume that although the fatalist peasant masses, resigned to their pathetic contentment, are not possibly posing a threat to the law and order situation, as peasants “never make history” and are incapable of leading themselves other than organizing short-lived, “pre-political” uprisings reflecting their “class-in-itself” mentality; the real danger comes from the disgruntled lower middle classes and the various lumpen elements in society. The broken promises of the successive governments since independence, which have delivered more of the same—hollow promises, corruption, unemployment and misery, adversely affecting the loyalty of the

80. Hashmi, “Culture, Governance and Underdevelopment: A Case Study of Bangladesh” (paper presented at the Thirty-fifth Bengal Studies Conference, Manhattan, Kansas State University, 18–20 May 2001).

petty bourgeoisie and the fast disappearing middle classes—may trigger the rise of the Jamaat as the alternative of the so-called liberal democratic and secular parties. This, however, would not signal the ascendancy of Islamic militants and anti-Hindu communal forces to power. It is highly unlikely that if the Jamaat and its allies ever come to power, that any threat would be posed to India, let alone to the West. Despite the alarmist views of some Western analysts, governments and their local adherents in Bangladesh, who seemingly have been influenced by Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, the ascendancy of Islam to political power in Bangladesh would not destabilize the region. However, the persecution and suffering of Muslims, for example in the Middle East and India, continue to arouse sympathy for their coreligionists and anger against their actual and perceived persecutors among the bulk of the Bangladeshi Muslims. Their solidarity with fellow Muslims elsewhere does not necessarily mean that Bangladeshi Muslims have turned terrorist, posing a threat to global order and democracy.