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BARRIERS TO COVENANTAL PLURALISM IN BANGLADESHI PUBLIC OPINION

By C. Christine Fair  and Parina Patel

Bangladesh, with an estimated population of 162 million, 90 percent of whom are Muslim, is the eighth-most populous country in the world and is home to about 10 percent of the world's Muslim population (CIA 2020; Pew 2017). While Bangladesh entered the comity of nations under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman (known as Mujib) and his Awami League party as a secular democracy with sharp curbs on Islamist politics, these features were short-lived. In 1975, a group of disgruntled army officers murdered Mujib. After this coup, Bangladesh suffered various coups and countercoups ultimately resulting in the seizure of power by Major Ziaur Rahman in 1977. Zia's government reinvigorated religion-based politics and struck out secularism from the 1972 constitution, replacing it with the declaration that, "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions." Zia's military regime revised the constitution to conform with Islamic notions of social justice and introduced "*Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*" ("In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful") in the constitution's preamble (Uddin 2015, 47–48). Zia withdrew the ban on religion-based political parties, which resumed their activities.

Lt. General Ershad, who led the second military regime (1981–1990), continued with Zia's Islamization efforts. In 1988, his government established Islam as the state

religion. While democracy was restored in 1990, there were no efforts to restore secularism or restrict religion-based politics until Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, became the prime minister for the second time in 2008. Three years later in 2011, her government restored secularism but retained Islam as the state religion and *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim* (Uddin 2015; Riaz 2004).

Under Hasina's leadership, the quality of Bangladesh's democracy continues to retrench. In March 2014, Dan Mozena, the then US Ambassador to Bangladesh, described Bangladesh as "a moderate and generally secular and tolerant—though sometimes this is getting stretched at the moment—alternative to violent

Abstract: In this paper, we explore Bangladeshi popular support for "covenantal pluralism," a philosophy developed by the Covenantal Pluralism Initiative at the Templeton Religion Trust. We use a novel dataset derived from a 2017 nationally representative survey of Bangladeshi respondents which included numerous survey items germane to this study. Unfortunately, while Bangladesh may most certainly benefit from such a concept, we find little empirical evidence of popular support for its key conditions and propositions. We also find little evidence that any Bangladeshi government would pursue such a concept legally because it would undermine key sources of legitimacy which are necessary to secure the current government's access to power and opportunities for graft.

Keywords: Bangladesh, covenantal pluralism, public opinion, religious freedom, Islam

extremism in a very troubled part of the world” (Gowen 2014). At that time, Freedom House scored Bangladesh’s democracy at 53 out of 100, garnering it the label “partly free.” Since then, the quality of Bangladesh’s democracy has continued to erode with its most recent Freedom House score of 39 of 100 (Freedom House 2020). Scholars of Bangladesh have been even more critical, arguing that Sheikh Hasina’s consolidated seizure of power has rendered Bangladesh an autocratic kleptocracy (Islam and Islam 2018; Fair 2020).

Nonetheless, the United States still “generally views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world” (Vaughn 2020, 1). It is a regular and active participant in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which it joined in 1974. And it has also hosted more than one million Rohingya Muslim refugees who escaped multiple waves of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar in a crowded warren of unplanned and exposed refugee camps about Cox’s Bazaar, near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border (Inter Sector Coordination Group 2020). In fact, going back decades, whenever the junta in Myanmar launched military or other punitive campaigns upon the Rohingya, they consistently went to Bangladesh.

Moreover, Bangladesh has made large strides in reducing total fertility rates non-coercively from 6.3 births per woman in 1975 to 3.4 births per woman in 1993–1994, where it has largely remained since (Islam, Islam, and Chakroborty 2004). It also met most of the so-called Millennium Development Goal (MDGs) with respect to poverty reduction, improving food security, increasing primary school enrollment, attaining gender parity in primary and secondary level education, decreasing infant and under-five mortality ratios, and expanding immunization coverage. Compared to other South Asian countries, Bangladesh now leads India and the region in terms of these indicators even though its per capita income is still significantly below the regional average (Mahumud, Asadullah, and Savoia 2013). Bangladesh’s ability to make these gains is all the more extraordinary given that Bangladesh is routinely ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (GAN 2020).

Bangladesh is also an important contributor to global security. Year after year, it distinguishes itself by dispatching some of the largest numbers of military and police forces to United Nations Peacekeeping Missions. As of June 2020, it was the second-largest contributor with 6,426 personnel deployed (United Nations 2020).

Unfortunately, Bangladesh is important for less salubrious reasons as well: it has been a site of Al Qaeda-Indian Subcontinent (AS-IS) and later Islamic State (IS) activities, both of which have perpetrated several attacks in Bangladesh using local cadres. Additionally, several domestic and Pakistani Islamist militant groups have long operated in and from Bangladesh (Fair, Hamza, and Heller 2017). At the same time, communal tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims perdure as has conflicts between Muslims of different sectarian backgrounds. We include Ahmadis as a Muslim sect, both to respect their self-identification as Muslim and to align with Bangladeshi law, which has not declared them to be non-Muslim.¹

At first blush, Bangladesh may benefit from the concept of “covenantal pluralism,” which comprises the focus of this journal’s ongoing series, given Bangladesh’s significant communal and sectarian diversity and the ever-contested role of Islam in the state. As Stewart, Seiple and Hoover argue, vague calls for mere “tolerance” are likely inadequate to mitigate the kinds of challenges besetting Bangladesh and its policy. They argue that:

The philosophy of covenantal pluralism reaches beyond banal appeals for peaceful coexistence and instead points to a robust, relational, and non-relativistic paradigm for living together, peacefully and productively, in the context of our deepest differences. Covenantal pluralism offers a holistic vision of citizenship that emphasizes both legal equality and neighborly solidarity. It calls for both a constitutional order characterized by equal rights and responsibilities and a culture of engagement characterized by relationships of mutual respect and protection. (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 1)

In this paper, we explore Bangladeshi popular support for covenantal pluralism using a unique dataset derived from a 2017 nationally representative survey of Bangladeshi respondents which included numerous survey items germane to this study. Unfortunately, while Bangladesh may most certainly benefit from such a concept, we find little empirical evidence of popular support for its key conditions and propositions. We also find little evidence that any Bangladeshi government would pursue such a concept legally because it would undermine key sources of legitimacy which are necessary to secure the current government's access to power and opportunities for graft.

We organize the remainder of this paper as follows. In the first section, we describe Bangladesh's contemporary challenges with both sectarian as well as communal intolerance and even violence. In the second section, we summarize the notion of covenantal pluralism and its crucial lineaments for the purposes of drawing hypotheses which we can empirically test with our survey data. In the third section, we describe the data and methodologies we use to test these hypotheses. Fourth, we discuss our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study.

Bangladesh's Coexistence Problem

Bangladesh's constitution embraces secularism as one of the fundamental principles of state policy; however, Article 2(a) declares that, "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions." Moreover, while Article 41 protects "freedom of religion," including the "right to profess, practice or propagate any religion" and the right of "every religious community or denomination ... to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions;" these rights are "subject to law, public order and morality." In 2015, the Supreme Court rejected a petition challenging Islam's status as the state religion. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom routinely identifies the various challenges faced by Bangladesh' religious

minorities (US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020).

Communal and sectarian strife has a long history in what is today Bangladesh. According to the 1941 census (the last census prior to partition), the areas that were to become Pakistan had a combined population of 70.3 million, of which 15.5 million were Hindus (22 percent and another 4 percent which were Christian and "others.") Of those 15.5 million Hindus, 11.7 million lived in East Pakistan and were overwhelmingly Bengali. While the partition of the Punjab garners most attention in studies of partition-related violence, the partition of Bengal into the Indian state of West Bengal and East Pakistan was also accompanied by communal brutality (Roy 2018). During the chaotic and sanguinary partition process, Sikhs and Hindus who were living in areas that would become Pakistan were brutally killed or driven into what would be India while Muslims in areas that were to become India were killed or driven into what would become Pakistan. After partition, many Hindus and Sikhs who somehow managed to survive partition and stayed in Pakistan concluded that living in Pakistan would be difficult and they too moved resulting in fewer minorities in the country by the time Pakistan conducted its first census in 1951 (Zaidi 1988).

According to Pakistan's 1951 census, the overall population was about 75 million with 33.7 million in West Pakistan and 42 million in East Pakistan. In 1951, non-Muslims comprised 1.6 percent of the overall population of West Pakistan and 23.2 percent of East Pakistan. Hindus, who were 12.9 percent of Pakistan's overall population, were predominantly concentrated in East Pakistan where they were 22 percent of the population (Rizvi 1981). A decade later, per the 1961 Census, religious minorities were 10.7 percent of the overall population of Pakistan, which numbered 94 million. Hindus constituted about 10 million of that minority population, 9.4 million of whom lived in East Pakistan where they were 18.4 percent of the population there. In West Pakistan, religious minorities remained steady at 1.6 percent of the population the vast majority of whom were Christian (Rizvi 1981; Sanullah 1962).

After Bangladesh's independence, the Hindu population continued to dwindle for several reasons. In addition to communal violence and ethnic cleansing, Bangladeshi law (such as the Vested Property Act) has permitted Hindu property to be stolen by Muslims. Additionally, in retaliation for Hindu violence against Muslims in India, Bangladeshi Muslims have retaliated against their Hindu citizens. Consequently, Barkat et al. assess that

over the last 40 years, the relative share of Hindu population declined from 18.4% of the total population in 1961 to 12.1% in 1981, to 10.5% in 1991 and further down to 9.2% in 2001. There was a corresponding rise in the relative share of Muslim population from 80.4% in 1961 to 86.7% in 1981, 88.3% in 1981 and 89.7% in 1991. (Barkat et al., cited by Guhathakurta 2012, 292)

According to the most recent Bangladeshi census of 2011, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians comprised 8.5, 0.6t, and 0.3 percent, respectively (Haider, Rahman, and Kamal 2019). The ongoing oppression and even ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Bangladesh have largely gone unremarked upon by western scholars (Feldman 2019). Buddhists as well as Christians have also been affected by ongoing erosion of religious freedom and civil leaders (Akins 2020).

While communal violence has been a long-standing concern in Bangladesh, so is sectarianism. In Bangladesh, sectarianism has had two guises. First is ongoing violence against Ahmadiis (also called Ahmadiyya, Ahmedis), whom many Muslims throughout the world revile as blasphemers among other equally unsavory monikers, because they do not recognize the ordinal finality of the prophet and recognize a 19th-century prophet, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908). For this reason, some countries such as Pakistan have legally declared them to be non-Muslim and prohibit them from calling themselves Muslim; calling their holy book the Quran; calling their prayer namaz; or their houses of worships mosques, among other similar restrictions. And Ahmadiis throughout

the Muslim world have been subject to harassment, violence and even murder. Bangladesh has not legally declared them to be non-Muslims despite calls from Muslim thought-leaders to do so, but it did ban their publications in 2004. (For this reason, we consider this kind of violence to be sectarian rather than communal.) Attacks on Ahmadi mosques and persons are all too common in Bangladesh. Even their graves are subject to desecration if they are buried in a Muslim cemetery, as most are (Human Rights Watch 2005; Kabir 2016). Sufis are also the subject of sectarian attacks by extremists because they too engage in practices that Salafists abjure such as attributing to the prophet Mohammad aspects which are reserved for Allah. Sufis, for example, tend to assert that the prophet had no shadow as he was made of light. And Salafists accuse them of engaging in practices that resemble worship of the prophet in the way that Christians worship Jesus. For such Muslims, these practices constitute *shirk*. For these reasons, extremists have targeted Bangladesh's varied Sufi shrines and those who worship in them (Akins 2020).

In addition to the Vested Property Act, religious minorities' religious freedoms have also been affected by the October 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA) which specifically criminalizes activities in the digital space ostensibly to increase digital security. However, many of the law's provisions limit civil rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. As the US Commission on International Religious Freedom notes,

While Bangladesh's Penal Code punishes blasphemy with up to two years in prison and a fine, the DSA further criminalizes blasphemy as a nonbailable offense and increases the penalties. Article 28 of the new law prohibits "Publication, Broadcast, etc. of such information in any website or in any electronic format that hampers the religious sentiment or values." It further reads that any person or group will be considered to have committed a criminal offense under this overly vague provision if they "intentionally or knowingly with the

aim of hurting religious sentiments or values or with the intention to provoke publish or broadcast anything by means of any website or any electronic format which hurts religious sentiment or values.” The DSA sets as the punishment not more than seven years for the first offense and not more than 10 years for repeat offenses. (US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020, 3)

One notable victim of this law is the Sufi folk singer, Shariat Sarker, who was arrested under the DSA in January 2020 after an Islamic scholar alleged that comments made by Sarker that were recorded and uploaded to YouTube hurt the “religious sentiments” of Muslims. His ostensibly offensive speech included assertions that the Qur’an does not proscribe music and his criticisms of using religion as a political tool. Sarker was jailed for six months and remains in hiding fearing death threats. Other Sufi singers such as Rita Dewan have also been targeted under this law. She lives under incessant death threats from vigilantes who have called for her beheading among other forms of murder (Bangkok Post 2020).

Central Elements of Covenantal Pluralism

Over the last several years, the Templeton Religion Trust has developed a concept of covenantal pluralism (Stewart 2018; Seiple 2018a, 2018b; Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020). Proponents argue that this concept, while admittedly ambitious as a normative vision, is nevertheless pragmatic and flexible enough to be a “realistic socio-political aspiration, one with relevance, appeal, and precedents across the world’s many religious/worldview traditions” (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 2). It differs from conventional conceptualizations of pluralism which often seem redolent of “breezy ecumenism, or an eclectic syncretism” (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 2). It also differs from conventional appeals for naively relativistic tolerance because minimalist versions of tolerance are antithetical to “genuinely authentic and sustainable pluralism” (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 5). For one

thing, they argue that “tolerance” can suggest a position of privilege or condescension. Afterall, it is unlikely that anyone prefers to be merely tolerated or tenuously accepted in a socio-political order for the simple reason that we tolerate or endure those issues which we would prefer to change if the opportunity arose. Second, they observe that such platitudinous calls for tolerance seek to obviate significant differences across theologies and some of the differences that inhere cannot be reconcilable.

Prothero (2010) describes a common aphorism that contends that all religions are essentially different paths up the same mountain. In other words, all religions are reducible to a similar set of tenets. Prothero sees such tolerance as vapid: how can you tolerate that which you don’t fully understand. Prothero, in effort to acknowledge and honor these differences, suggests instead that the world’s religions are ascending dissimilar mountains with diverse tools and techniques. By eliding such differences, one is opting to not engage those differences and even trivialize them. This is orthogonal to a genuine pluralism and tolerance because it disengages from differences rather than coming to terms with the same (Seligman, Wasserfall, and Montgomery 2016). Stewart, Seiple and Hoover further explain that:

A world of covenantal pluralism is characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other—albeit without necessarily conceding equal veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others. The envisioned end-state is neither a thin-soup ecumenism nor vague syncretism, but rather a positive, practical, non-relativistic pluralism. It is a paradigm of civic fairness and human solidarity, a covenant of global neighborliness that is intended to bend but not break under the pressure of diversity. (2020, 2)

What are some of the conditions that are individually required and jointly sufficient for

covenantal pluralism? The first, is a *freedom of religion and belief*, which Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (2020) derive largely from the Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human rights. This has two aspects. The first is the free exercise of religion/freedom of conscience. The other is an equal treatment of religions or worldviews. This requires robust legal protections for such religious freedoms. The second condition is *religious literacy* with regards to one's own religious tradition or belief system but also with regards to the belief systems of others. A third is the embodiment and expression of *virtues* required in engaging people with different religions or worldviews and coming to respect the commitments of others without necessarily conceding moral equivalence or feigned agreement on complex issues.

Data and Analytical Methods

To discern the level of support within Bangladeshi public opinion for the above-noted scope of conditions for covenantal pluralism, we use several questionnaire items from a novel survey fielded in 2017. In this section, we first describe the survey data that we will use for this study. Second, we describe how we operationalize the concepts described to assess the presence or absence of such conditions.

The Data

To analyze respondent support for the necessary conditions for covenantal pluralism, we employ survey data derived from a face-to-face, nationally representative survey of 3,488 Bangladeshis, fielded in *Bangla* (Bengali), which is the country's national language, by gender-appropriate teams. The survey was conducted in April 2017 under Institutional Review Board (IRB) supervision on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and executed by the RESOLVE NETWORK, under the auspices of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The survey effort was led by two co-principal investigators (C. Christine Fair and Ali Riaz), who developed the instrument, oversaw the quality control of the translation, identified and worked with a highly regarded Bangladeshi survey firm (which wishes to remain

un-named due to Bangladesh's political environment) to conduct focus groups about the instrument and pre-test it to ensure that it performed as expected. The instrument collected demographic information for the respondents as well as their beliefs about an array of issues including religion, governance, and violent extremism. The firm conducted the survey between April 12–30, 2017.

The Bangladeshi survey firm employed a stratified random sampling design that was nationally representative at division levels. (Bangladesh has eight divisions.) Sample ratios were 50 percent male and 50 percent female and 75 percent rural and 25 percent urban, which are in accord with the 2011 Bangladesh Population Census. Samples at the division level were assigned in line with the proportionate distribution of the population, including religion, as provided by the 2011 Census (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics). The survey response rate was 70 percent, which is similar to comparable surveys in Bangladesh which have a recorded response rate of 75 percent. The study team originally sought to sample 8000 respondents; however, nearly halfway through the survey effort, local authorities objected to survey questions about the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and insisted that they be removed as a condition of permitting the study to continue. The team discontinued further enrollments both for scientific reasons and because the distribution of the sample that had been collected was representative of Bangladesh' eight administrative divisions with reference to gender, religion, and urban/rural residence. The original margin of error for the survey with a sample size of 8,000 was about 1.10 percent at a 5 percent level of significance. The margin of error for the reduced sample was 1.54 percent at a 5 percent level of significance. While the resultant sample is smaller than planned, it is still four times larger than other publicly available surveys, including Pew's Global Attitudes Survey (Pew 2014).

Variable Instrumentalization and Analysis

The first enabling condition for covenantal pluralism as defined by the Templeton Religion

Trust is a robustly protected freedom to exercise one’s religion/freedom of conscience and an equal treatment of religions or worldviews. As we discussed earlier, Bangladesh constitutionally does not meet this standard in full. While secularism is embraced as a pillar of the state, Islam is still the state religion and the state continues to persecute sectarian and communal minorities while the state security apparatus fails to protect them from Islamist vigilantes. To assess propensities towards public support for the first set of scope conditions, we use survey items that speak to respondents’ beliefs about their political and juridical preferences and aspirations on matters pertaining to faith and its praxis.

To exposit respondents’ preferred models of governance, we use a survey item (Q910) which asks respondents about their governance preferences. In this item, respondents indicated whether they preferred a “democratic leader;” “non-democratic, strong, secular leader;” “democratically-elected religious leader;” or a “non-democratic religious leader.” These response categories reflect Bangladesh’s past and contemporary political reality. For many, Sheikh Hasina represents the category of “non-democratic, strong, secular leader” (Fair and Patel 2019). The response category of “democratically-elected religious leader” reflects the political philosophy of BJEP, which is to Islamize Bangladesh with the consent of the public through fair elections (Fair and Patel 2019). “Non-democratic religious leader,” in contrast, reflects the aspirations of the country’s Islamist revolutionaries such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda Indian Subcontinent. Results are in Table 1.

We next use survey item Q178 which asks respondents whether non-Muslims should be subjected to Islamic law. This survey item directly addresses whether respondents accept non-Muslims fundamental rights, guaranteed in the Constitution, to live their lives per their own religious beliefs and commitments even when they are irreconcilable with some persons’ interpretations of Islam. Results are in Table 2.

We use several questions to understand respondents’ preferences for religious leadership and Islam in the daily lives of citizens as they

Table 1. Democracy and religious/secular leaders.

Q910. “Some feel that we should rely on a democratic form of government to solve our country’s problems. Others feel that we should rely on a powerful, non-democratic, secular leader to solve our country’s problems. Some other group says we should have a religious, democratically-elected leader. A fourth group suggests we should have a non-democratic, religious leader. Out of these four statements which one comes closer to your opinion?”		Percent
Democratic leader		51.15
Non-democratic, strong, secular leader		4.33
Democratically-elected religious leader		43.61
Non-democratic religious leader		0.92
Total		100.00

Table 2. Applicability of Sharia.

Q178. “In your opinion, should Muslims and non-Muslims in Bangladesh be subject to the sharia (or Islamic law), or should it only be applied to Muslims?”		Percent
Both Muslims and non-Muslim		51.86
Muslims only		48.14
Total		100.00

interact with the state. For example, Q915 asks respondents “how much influence should [Islamic] religious leaders [ulema, maulvis] have in matters of political governance.” This is yet another measure of respondents’ desire to impose their religio-political preferences upon other Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Similarly, Q970 queries respondent support for giving Muslim leaders such as imams, “the power to decide family and property disputes.” This not only speaks to Muslim respondents’ desire to assert interpretations of Muslim family law over other Muslims, who may prefer that such matters be referred to secular courts but also their desire to assert such interpretations on non-Muslims. Q985 asks if respondents favor or oppose using physical punishments (*hudoon* punishments) such as whippings or cutting off hands for various crimes such as theft. Q990 similarly asks respondents whether they favor or oppose stoning persons who commit adultery, which is

another *hudood* punishment. Results are in Tables 3–6, respectively.

We use one question (Q175) to assess respondent beliefs about the extent to which laws in Bangladesh follow the prescriptions of Sharia, and another (Q176) which asks them whether they believe that this current state of affairs is good or bad. This allows us to identify persons who want the laws of the country to align more with Sharia and those who want less alignment. Presumably those who want more Sharia are unwilling to concede autonomy to other Muslims who have different political and

Table 3. Political influence of religious leaders.

Q915. “In your opinion, how much influence should religious leaders [ulema, maulvis] have in matters of political governance? A large influence, some influence, not too much influence or no influence at all?”	Percent
Large influence	41.86
Some influence	44.32
Not too much influence	9.35
No influence at all	4.47
Total	100.00

Table 4. Imams and family/property disputes.

Q970. “Do you favor or oppose giving Muslim leaders such as Imams, the power to decide family and property disputes?”	Percent
Completely favor	40.74
Somewhat favor	32.51
Somewhat oppose	11.64
Completely oppose	15.11
Total	100.00

Table 5. Punishments for theft.

Q985. “Do you favor or oppose punishments like whippings and cutting off of hands for crimes like theft and robbery?”	Percent
Completely favor	55.73
Somewhat favor	19.70
Somewhat oppose	11.53
Completely oppose	13.04
Total	100.00

Table 6. Stoning for adultery.

Q990. “Do you favor or oppose stoning people who commit adultery?”	Percent
Completely favor	66.17
Somewhat favor	16.80
Somewhat oppose	7.17
Completely oppose	9.86
Total	100.00

juridical preferences as well as non-Muslims who are forced to live under a legal regime that explicitly privileges the tenets of Islam. (This question cannot address the very robust and often violent difference of opinion about which school of Islamic jurisprudence should be the standard of sharia in Bangladesh. While most Muslims in Bangladesh are adherents to the Hanafi school, there are very serious disagreements among them which cannot be reconciled and have often precipitated violent clashes.) These combined results are in Tables 7–9.

Finally, we use two survey items addressing issues of marriage and one item addressing “apostacy.” Because marriage is a contract that is

Table 7. Sharia compliance of Bangladeshi law.

Q175. “In your opinion, how closely, if at all, do the laws in Bangladesh follow the Sharia (Islamic law)?”	Percent
Very closely	25.43
Somewhat closely	44.35
Not too closely	21.22
Not at all closely	9.00
Total	100.00

Table 8. Opinion of Sharia compliance.

Q176. “And, in your opinion, is this good thing or a bad thing?” Of those who feel Bangladeshi law follows Sharia somewhat or very closely ($N = 2434$) ...	Percent
Good thing	91.37
Bad thing	7.31
Neither	1.32
Total	100.00

Table 9. Opinion of Sharia non-compliance.

Q176. “And, in your opinion, is this good thing or a bad thing?” Of those who feel Bangladeshi law follows Sharia not too closely or not at all (<i>N</i> = 1054) ...		Percent
Good thing		21.25
Bad thing		76.00
Neither		2.75
Total		100.00

recognized by the state and by Islam, we include these questions in this section about political and juridical preferences. D300 asks whether the respondent believes “Non-Muslims and Muslims should be allowed to inter-marry freely” and D310 asks whether “Sunnis and Shias should be allowed to inter-marry freely.” These results are in [Tables 10](#) and [11](#), respectively. We then examine question Q975, which has to do with punishments for leaving Islam (“apostasy”). For many Muslims, it is apostasy and punishable by death to leave Islam. This question directly addresses this concern by asking respondents whether they “Favor or oppose the death penalty for Bangladesh Muslims who leave Islam”? (see [Table 12](#)).

The second category of enabling conditions for covenantal pluralism is religious literacy. This includes understanding one’s own religion/worldview as well as understanding the religions/

Table 10. Inter-religious marriage.

D-300. “In your opinion, should non-Muslims and Muslims be allowed to inter-marry?”		Percent
Yes		7.05
No		92.95
Total		100.00

Table 11. Sunni-Shia marriage.

D-310. “In your opinion, should Sunnis and Shia be allowed to inter-marry freely?”		Percent
Yes		40.25
No		59.75
Total		100.00

Table 12. Death penalty for leaving Islam.

Q975. “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for Bangladeshi Muslims who leave the Muslim religion?”		Percent
Completely favor		54.79
Somewhat favor		15.08
Somewhat oppose		12.53
Completely oppose		17.60
Total		100.00

worldviews of others. Unfortunately, the survey did not include any questions pertinent to religious literacy about faiths other than Islam. However, it did include a range of questions probing knowledge of various facts about Islam’s tenets and teachings. We report findings from 6 such questions here that are illustrative of the overall pattern. Respectively these six questions (Q060, Q070, Q080, Q095, Q099, and Q100) ask respondents if they know: the five pillars of Islam; whether the way Muslims should pray Namaz (Salat or Salah) is described in the Qu’ran; the percentage required as Zakat; the first revealed verse in the Qu’ran; how many sajda ayats are in the Quran; and, the first month of the Islamic calendar (see [Table 13](#)).

Table 13. Knowledge of Islam.

	% of Muslim respondents giving the correct answer
Q060. “Name as many of the five pillars of Islam as you can.” (identified all 5)	34.46
Q070. “Is the way in which Muslims should pray Namaz (Salat or Salah) described in the Qu’ran?”	14.48
Q080. “What is the percentage amount required to be given as Zakat?”	21.73
Q095. “What is the first revealed verse in the Qu’ran?”	9.6
Q099. “How many sajda ayats are in the Quran?”	23.54
Q100. “What is the first month of the Islamic calendar?”	16.80

The third category of enabling conditions for covenantal pluralism is the embodiment and praxis of key pluralist virtues via engaging others with different religions and worldviews, which requires one to respect their commitments and internal differences without conceding moral equivalence or downplaying those differences. This pertains to both interactions with other sects of Islam as well as non-Muslims. Here we use several survey items that query respondents about their interactions with non-Muslims as well as other Muslims whose sectarian commitments may differ.

First, we use Q920 which asks the respondent “how many of your close friends are Muslims?” Response categories range from “all of them” to “none of them.” Persons of anti-pluralist disposition or who embrace minimalist interpretations of tolerance are not likely to socialize with non-Muslims, in part because Islam has various rules of commensalism that are often in opposition to those of Hindus, the largest religious minority in Bangladesh, and in part because they do not truly recognize the legitimate political, religious, and social aspirations of non-Muslims. See [Table 14](#) for results.

To help understand respondents’ willingness to acknowledge differences of opinion within Islam (even if the respondent is not an “all roads lead to heaven” relativist), we use survey question Q940, which has to do with the respondent’s willingness to acknowledge diversity within Islam, i.e. differences in interpreting the meaning of Islam’s teachings. The question asks respondents whether they believe “There is only one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam;” or “There is more than one true way to interpret

the teachings of Islam;” or “Neither/both equally” ([Table 15](#)).

The survey also asks respondents about three specific Islamist terrorist groups and a notorious terrorist attack each perpetrated. For each, respondents were asked whether they had heard of the event, whether they agree with the goals, and whether they agree with the violent means. Questions 700, 701, and 702 pertain to an attack by the Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh which detonated several hundred bombs in 2005 to coerce the government into eliminating the secular judicial system and replace it with Sharia (see [Tables 16–18](#)). The second set (Q703–705) pertains to a 2015 attack by the Ansarullah Bangla Team which brutally murdered a publisher of secular publications with machetes in an effort to coerce publishers to stop issuing secular materials (see [Tables 19–21](#)). The third set (706–708) pertains to an Islamic State attack in 2016 on a popular bakery, specifically targeting non-Muslims. Their aim was to establish Sharia throughout the Muslim world. These sets of questions speak very directly to respondents’ support for violent politics in

Table 14. Muslim and non-Muslim friends.

Q920. “How many of your close friends are Muslims? Would you say”	Percent
All of them	76.43
Most of them	21.88
Some of them	1.20
Hardly any of them	0.37
None of them	0.11
Total	100.00

Table 15. Interpretations of teachings of Islam.

Q940. “Now I’m going to read you two additional statements. Please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views—even if neither is exactly right.”	Percent
There is only ONE true way to interpret the teachings of Islam	39.94
There is MORE than one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam	59.75
Neither / Both equally	0.32
Total	100.00

Table 16. Awareness of Bangla Bhai Bombing.

Q700. “In 2005, Bangla Bhai (leader of the Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh) was involved in setting off several hundred small bombs simultaneously in 63 of 64 districts. Have you heard of this event?”	Percent
Yes	61.12
No	38.88
Total	100.00

Table 17. Support for the Goals of Bangla Bhai.

Q701. “According to Bangla Bhai, he and his group wanted to eliminate Bangladesh’s judicial system and replace it with sharia (Islamic) law. How much do you support the goals of Bangla Bhai to “eliminate Bangladesh’s judicial system and replace it with sharia law?”	Percent
None at all	61.91
Very little	7.13
Somewhat	12.34
Very much	9.15
Completely	9.47
Total	100.00

Table 18. Support for the means that Bangla Bhai used.

Q702. “How much do you support the means he used (bomb blasts) to achieve this goal?”	Percent
None at all	95.83
Very little	2.11
Somewhat	0.98
Very much	0.42
Completely	0.66
Total	100.00

Table 19. Awareness of ABT murder.

Q703. “In October 2015, members of the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), using machetes, attacked and killed Faisal Arefin Dipan. Have you heard of this event?”	Percent
Yes	27.58
No	72.42
Total	100.00

Table 20. Support for the goals of ABT.

Q704. “They did so because he was a publisher of secular materials but they object to these materials. How much do you support the goals of ABT in stopping the publication of these secular materials?”	Percent
None at all	71.83
Very little	6.86
Somewhat	9.15
Very much	7.38
Completely	4.78
Total	100.00

Table 21. Support for the means ABT used.

Q705. “How much do you support the means (murdering publishers and writers) to achieve this goal?”	Percent
None at all	94.80
Very little	2.08
Somewhat	0.73
Very much	1.14
Completely	1.25
Total	100.00

pursuit of beliefs that are directionally antagonistic to even a minimalist notion of tolerance or pluralism much less the more robust pluralism imagined by covenantal pluralism (see Tables 22–24).

Discussion of Results

What do these survey items tell us about popular support for the first scope condition of covenantal pluralism, which we operationalize as support for legal conditions that protect one’s right to pursue freedom of religion/freedom of conscience in the country? The first item we

Table 22. Awareness of Islamic State bakery attack.

Q706. “In July 2016, five Bangladesh youths affiliated with the Islamic State attacked the Holy Artisan Bakery in Dhaka. Have you heard of this event?”	Percent
Yes	61.07
No	38.93
Total	100.00

Table 23. Support for the goals of the Islamic State.

Q707. “They specifically targeted non-Muslims. According to the Islamic State this attack was intended to help establish sharia (Islamic law) throughout the world. How much do you support the goals of Islamic State of establishing the Caliphate throughout the world?”	Percent
None at all	70.52
Very little	7.75
Somewhat	10.00
Very much	6.20
Completely	5.54
Total	100.00

Table 24. Support for the means used in the Islamic State attack.

Q708. "How much do you support the means (the targeting of non-Muslims in the Holy Artisan Bakery) to achieve this goal?"	Percent
None at all	95.02
Very little	2.58
Somewhat	1.13
Very much	0.75
Completely	0.52
Total	100.00

analyzed was the respondent's preferred form of government (Table 1): while a slim majority (51.15 percent) preferred a democratic leader, a large minority (43.61 percent) preferred a democratically elected religious [Muslim] leader. Respondents were nearly divided when asked whether non-Muslims should be subject to Islamic law (Sharia, Table 2) with a majority (51.86 percent) saying that both should be subject to Islamic law and 48.14 percent indicating that it should only apply to Muslims. A large majority of respondents also believe that religious leaders should have "a large influence" (41.86 percent) or "some influence" (44.32 percent) in matters of political governance while a meagre 4.47 percent said "no influence at all" (Table 3). A large majority either "completely favor" (40.74 percent) or "somewhat favor" (32.51 percent) giving Muslim *imams* the power to decide family and property disputes while 15.11 percent completely oppose doing so (Table 4). Large majorities (55.73 percent) also favor or "somewhat favor" (19.70 percent) using physical punishments (whipping, amputations), whereas 13.04 percent oppose doing so (Table 5). Large majorities also "completely favor" (66.17 percent) or "somewhat favor" (16.80 percent) stoning persons for adultery while fewer than one in ten (9.86 percent) oppose doing so (Table 6).

We used two survey items to assess the degree to which Bangladeshis believe the laws of the country align with Islamic law and whether they

agree with the current level of accordance (Tables 7–9). On the issue of compliance, respondents were split: about one in four (25.43 percent) believe Bangladesh's laws "very closely" follow Islamic law, while 21.22 and 9.00 percent indicated that laws are "not too closely" or "not at all closely" aligned with Islam law respectively. A plurality (44.35 percent) indicated that they "somewhat" align (Table 7). Of the 2434 respondents who indicated that Bangladesh's laws are closely or somewhat Sharia compliant, the vast majority (91.37 percent) believed this is a good thing. Of the 1,054 respondents who thought the country's laws are not Sharia compliant, most (76.00 percent) thought this was a bad thing

(Tables 7–9). Thus overall, we can conclude from these three questions that "most respondents prefer a high degree of accordance between the country's laws and Sharia."

Finally, we analyzed findings on survey questions

about legal prohibitions on inter-marriage and on "apostacy." An overwhelming majority (92.95 percent) support banning marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims (Table 10).

Respondents were more divided on the issue of intermarriage between Sunnis and Shias, with 40.25 percent indicating that they should be able to freely intermarry while the majority (59.75 percent) opposed such intermarriage (Table 11). Bangladeshi Muslims are also unaccepting of other Muslims leaving their faith and would approve the most severe of consequences for such "apostates" (Table 12). When asked whether they favor or oppose the death penalty for those Muslims who leave the faith, a solid majority said that they "completely favor" (54.79 percent) or "somewhat favor" (15.08 percent) killing so-called apostates, whereas 12.53 percent "somewhat oppose" and another 17.60 percent "completely oppose" doing so.² Thus overall, we can conclude that there is extraordinarily little support among Bangladeshi Muslims for the legal protections that would permit Muslims and non-Muslims to pursue their religious beliefs and aspirations in the country.

MOST RESPONDENTS PREFER
A HIGH DEGREE OF
ACCORDANCE BETWEEN THE
COUNTRY'S LAWS AND
SHARIA

We next examine survey evidence relevant to religious literacy. Although the survey is of limited utility in this regard, it does contain several items that shed partial light on the extent to which Bangladeshi Muslims know various facts about their own religion. At least as measured by these variables, the survey findings suggest that the level of specificity of Bangladeshi Muslims' knowledge of Islam is low. As we report in [Table 13](#), only about one-third (34.46 percent) correctly identified all five pillars of Islam. The percentage answering the other questions correctly were, in descending order: 23.54 percent (number of sajdah ayats in the Qur'an), 21.73 percent (amount to be given as Zakat), 16.80 percent (first month of Islamic calendar), 14.48 percent (whether the way in which Muslims should pray Namaz is described in the Qur'an), and 9.6 percent (first revealed verse in the Qur'an).

We next assess popular support for the third scope condition of covenantal pluralism, which is embodiment and expression of pluralist virtues entailed in engaging persons with different faith commitments or persons whose sectarian commitments vary. At the most basic level, one measure is the degree to which respondents socialize with non-Muslims ([Table 14](#)). An overwhelming majority (98.31 percent) indicated that either "all" (76.43 percent) or "most" (21.88 percent) of their close friends are Muslims. A meagre 59 respondents out of 3,488 indicated that "some" (1.20 percent), "hardly any" (0.37 percent) or "none" (0.11 percent) of their friends are Muslims. Given that about 11 percent of Bangladesh is currently non-Muslim, it appears as if Muslim Bangladeshis are deliberately opting to associate with other Muslims nearly exclusively.

Another survey item gauged respondents' acknowledgment of intra-Islam differences over interpretation of Islam's teachings. Here respondents exhibited somewhat more flexibility: most respondents (59.75 percent) believed that there is plurality in the teachings of Islam while 39.94 percent believed that there is only one true way to interpret Islam's teachings. Eleven respondents (0.32 percent) refused to commit to either position ([Table 15](#)). Still, while there

seems to be more willingness to accommodate sectarian differences than communal differences, a large minority rejects sectarian interpretative differences.

Finally, we draw upon the three batteries of questions about specific terrorist groups' attacks to discern support for each of the group's goals and violent means. When asked about the 2005 Bangla Bhai attack which aimed to coerce the state to abandon secular law and adopt Sharia law, 30.40 percent supported this goal either "somewhat" (12.34 percent), "very much" (9.15 percent), or "completely" (9.47 percent). In contrast, 69.04 percent indicated that they did not support those goals in any measure ([Table 16](#)). When it came to violent means, overwhelmingly, respondents rejected them (95.83 percent) ([Table 18](#)). Similar results obtained for the 2015 Ansarullah Bangla Team assault on a secular publisher seeking to compel the cessation of such publications: only 21.31 percent supported the goals somewhat, very much, or completely while overwhelming majorities rejected the violent means (94.80 percent) ([Tables 20 and 21](#)). With respect to the 2016 Islamic State attack on the Holey Bakery, about one in five (21.74 percent) agreed with the goal either "somewhat," "very much," or "completely," and 95.02 percent rejected their means in entirety ([Tables 23 and 24](#)). This battery provides a bit of nuance to the demands for Sharia: while other survey items indicate consistently large majorities in favor of imposing Sharia upon all citizens including its most draconian punishments for theft, adultery, and apostasy, support for Sharia is less notable when the demand is advanced by a terrorist group. So, while overall Bangladeshis are not supportive of any of the three categories of enabling conditions for covenantal pluralism, they are not enthusiastic about the purveyors of violence who seek to impose Sharia using the coercive tool of terrorism.

Conclusion

The data that we analyze here provide overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of Bangladeshis are not receptive to even the thinnest notions of tolerance and pluralism with respect to the nearly 11 percent of the citizens of

their country who are non-Muslim. At the same time, they also exhibit very high levels of intolerance towards other Muslims whose sectarian interpretations differ from their own. While Bangladesh could certainly benefit from covenantal pluralism, our review of the ways in which Bangladesh's various leaders continue to use Islam for political purposes provides little basis for optimism that any government in the policy-relevant future would even consider putting into place the legal protections that are

foundational for covenantal pluralism, much less encouraging the societal-wide changes that are necessary for it to flourish. The concept of covenantal pluralism is a holistic vision aiming to cultivate favorable conditions from both the "top-down" and the "bottom-up." Given the major barriers that exist at both levels in Bangladesh today, progress toward covenantal pluralism will accordingly require sophisticated, multi-dimensional approaches combined with strategic vision and patience. ❖

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Notes

1. Some orthodox Muslims are adamant that Ahmadis are not Muslim because they do not respect the ordinal finality of the prophethood. Some even argue that any Ahmadi self-identifying as Muslim is committing blasphemy (see Kabir 2016).
2. Note that this survey also included a question about evangelism "Here is a statement: 'Muslims have a duty to try and convert others to Islam.' Please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it, or completely disagree with it". It also included a question about whether Islam is the one true faith ("Now I'm going to read you two statements. Please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views—even if neither is exactly right: 'Islam is the one, true faith leading to eternal life in heaven'; 'Many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven'.") A huge majority (86.67 percent) completely or mostly agreed with a Muslim duty to evangelize, and likewise most respondents (75.72 percent) believe Islam is the one true faith. The philosophy of covenantal pluralism as defined by the Templeton Religion Trust stipulates that making exclusive truth claims and engaging in evangelism (if conducted ethically) are not necessarily incompatible with full commitment to covenantal pluralist norms. It is only when theological/worldview exclusivism gets linked up with socio-political exclusivism, discrimination, and persecution that covenantal pluralism is obviously violated. Given the overall pattern of findings in this survey, it appears likely that these sorts of socio-political linkages are in fact commonplace in Bangladesh today.

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