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## Religious Intolerance in Bangladesh

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### Introduction

**B**ANGLADESH, WITH AN ESTIMATED POPULATION of 162 million, 90 per cent of whom are Muslim, is the eighth most populous country in the world and is home to about 10 per cent of the world's Muslim population.<sup>1</sup> While Bangladesh entered the comity of nations under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (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 counter-coups, ultimately resulting in the seizure of power by Major Ziaur Rahman in 1977.

Zia's government reinvigorated religion-based politics and struck secularism from the 1972 Constitution, replacing it with '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.<sup>2</sup> 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 a second time in 2008. Three years later, in 2011, her government restored secularism but retained Islam as the state religion and *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*.<sup>3</sup>

Under Hasina's leadership, the quality of Bangladesh's democracy continues to deteriorate. Freedom House currently assesses Bangladeshi democracy at a score of 39 out of 100, which means that Bangladesh is only 'partly free'.<sup>4</sup> Scholars of Bangladesh have been even more critical, arguing that Sheikh Hasina's consolidated seizure of power has rendered Bangladesh an autocratic kleptocracy.<sup>5</sup>

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), competition, 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.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, communal tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims persist, as do 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.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the United States still ‘generally views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world’.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, we explore sectarian and communal intolerance in Bangladesh using a unique dataset derived from a 2017 nationally representative survey of Bangladeshi respondents, which included numerous survey items germane to this study. We find deep support for Sharia among Bangladeshi respondents, including its draconian physical punishments, as well as a strong preference for upon non-Muslims. Bangladeshi Muslims not only register high levels of communal intolerance, but they also evince significance sectarian intolerance.

We organize the remainder of this paper as follows. In the next section, we provide a brief history of democracy and secularism in Bangladesh. In the third section, we describe Bangladesh’s contemporary challenges with both sectarian as well as communal intolerance and violence. In the fourth section, we describe the data and methodologies we have used to assess communal and sectarian intolerance in Bangladesh. Fifth, we discuss our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study.

### **Islam and Democracy: Uneasy Partners in Bangladesh**

In 1947, the British divided the erstwhile Raj into India and Pakistan after Muslim League activists demanded a separate Muslim state based upon the so-called ‘Two Nation Theory’, which held that Muslims could not live with security and dignity in a Hindu-dominated democratic India. The Pakistan that emerged had two wings, East and West, separated by the expanse of India. East Pakistan was ethnically homogeneous, dominated by a Bengali ethnic majority; nearly a quarter of the population was Hindu. In contrast,

West Pakistan was ethnically diverse but had less religious diversity. West Pakistan deployed political Islam to suppress ethnic aspirations in both wings of the nascent state.

After enduring years of economically extractive policies, perduring efforts to deprive Bengalis of the political power their numerical strength and political coherence demanded, their continued exclusion from government and military services as well as brutal ethno-linguistic and cultural oppression, Bengalis began to demand change. Initially, they fought for greater autonomy and federalism within the framework of Pakistan. In contrast, elites in West Pakistan wanted a strong federal government.

When the Awami League contested the 1970 election, it was on Mujib's so-called 'Six Point Programme' that articulated such demands.<sup>9</sup> The Awami League easily won a robust majority of seats in the Parliament, which would position it to determine Pakistan's Constitution in the constituent assembly; however, to pre-empt this outcome, western Pakistani elites refused to let them convene the Parliament. By March 1970, Bengalis understood that West Pakistan would never treat Bengalis fairly and launched a violent insurrection. The western wing used Islamist militias, including some who were under the control of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI),<sup>10</sup> as well as the armed forces to brutally suppress Bengali agitators. Approximately three million people died in the conflict, and millions more were displaced. Many of the perpetrators of extreme violence were associated with the JeI, which aided the Pakistani army in committing atrocities against civilians in East Pakistan. Finally, in December 1971, with Indian assistance, the Bengali freedom fighters (*mukti bahini*) secured an independent Bangladesh.<sup>11</sup>

Neither the war nor the emergence of Bangladesh was a foregone conclusion. Had a peaceful transfer of power taken place and had the Awami League been able to forge a constitution with

greater devolution of power and autonomy for all provinces and institute more inclusive governance structures, many of Pakistan's contemporary security challenges may have been forestalled, such as the sanguinary conflict with ethnic Baloch who harbour grievances similar to those of the Bengalis but, because they comprise less than five per cent of Pakistan's population, lack the demographic or political heft.<sup>12</sup>

Because this did not occur and because West Pakistan responded with a brutal military response, Bengalis in East Pakistan, from all social classes and religious commitments, took up arms against the West Pakistan military and their Islamist militant allies in pursuit of freedom. Bengalis who did not join the ranks of the *mukti bahini* provided material support to them. However, despite the broad basis of mobilization, there was 'no debate or consensus on the form of the state that might emerge after the war. The ideological basis of the state was imposed once the country became independent.'<sup>13</sup>

Despite the absence of any consensus on the ideological or philosophical basis of the state, the government hurriedly framed the Constitution in 1972 based upon Bengali nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy, for several reasons. First, the Awami League embraced these bases of statehood, partly due to Indian prodding.<sup>14</sup> Pakistan came into the international system with a communal ideology, which held that Pakistan was the rightful home of South Asia's Muslims. Pakistan's national ideology was inimical to India's own beliefs, that it was a secular democracy for persons of all creeds. In considerable measure, Pakistan's state ideology not only forged a civilizational opposition to India, but it also justified Pakistan's ill-founded territorial claims to Kashmir.<sup>15</sup>

Second, in 'the wake of military suppression, brutalities, fire and hate, a small group of secular and radical leaders, intellectuals and students selected the symbolism of Bangladesh nationalism'.<sup>16</sup> In this

spirit, they selected a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, purportedly composed following protests against the much-detested 1905 partition of Bengal, as the Bangladeshi national song. Third, because Mujib himself was in a Pakistani jail from 26 March 1971, when the crackdown in East Pakistan began, until 8 January 1972, most political leaders were still in Calcutta, where they began forging the contours of the new state.

Consequently, the 'polemics of the exiled leaders, the noises of independence war and radicalism of the freedom fighters were more a language of vengeance, fantasy and escape. Much of what they did were designed to tap deep into the Bengali resentment and rejection of Pakistan, lock, stock and barrel including the Muslim identity which midwife the creation of a separate Muslim state in 1947.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, due to the collaborationist role that JeI and other Islamist militant groups<sup>18</sup> played in what historians have called the Bengali genocide in East Pakistan,<sup>19</sup> Mujib's government banned the organization, which became known as the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (BJeI).<sup>20</sup> The role of BJeI in the atrocities committed during the war of liberation remains a contentious issue and explains why many Bangladeshis are wary of Islamism generally and of BJeI specifically.<sup>21</sup>

There was no referendum to secure citizens' approval for these bases of the state due to the hurried nature of forging the Constitution and the lack of national consensus on the lineaments and foundations of the document and the state, despite contemporary concerns about this notion of secularism as a state principle.<sup>22</sup> In hindsight, this posited national narrative had a fundamental flaw: it rejected the simple fact that for most of the citizens of this new Bangladesh, Islam had formed the basis of their identity for hundreds of years.

Those who picked up arms against the Pakistani army did not do so to forge a 'socialist, secular society that diminished the prominence

of Islam as a component of the political identity of East Bengali Muslims, a commonly made *ex post* claim.

Consequently, the 1971 independence war did not bring fundamental changes in the structural parameters of Bangladeshi Muslim society, whose contemporary identity and tradition have been evolving since the thirteenth century or much earlier.<sup>23</sup> Thus, even while secularism, *dharmo niropekhkhota* (religious neutrality), was being promoted by Mujib and his Awami League, religious groups, including the reviled BJeI, opposed it, arguing that it was in fact *dharmohinata* or non-religiousness.<sup>24</sup> In an effort to allay some of these concerns, in 1972, Mujib explained to Parliament that

‘Secularism (*dharma niropekhkhata*) does not mean absence of religion. Muslims will observe their religion and nobody in this state has the power to prevent that. Hindus will observe their religion and nobody has the power to prevent that. Buddhists and Christians will observe their respective religions and nobody can prevent that. Our only objection is that nobody will be allowed to use religion as a political weapon.’<sup>25</sup>

In other words, secularism in Bangladesh in this period is best understood as multi-theocracy.<sup>26</sup>

Despite being the party that birthed Bangladesh, the Awami League’s popularity was short-lived because it was unable to contend with corruption, slow economic growth and general incompetence. Corrupt elections in 1973, a fragmented opposition movement, complicit legislators and the presence of an elite paramilitary force called Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini allowed the AL to remain in power despite declining support for the AL and the secular values it claimed to espouse. Over time, the resurgent importance of Bangladeshis’ personal identity as Muslim made it difficult for the government to

maintain its commitment to secularism.<sup>27</sup> While secularism allowed citizens to separate their identities as Bangladeshis (distinct from Bengalis in India) on the one hand and as Muslims on the other, it did not eliminate the importance of personal faith, and openly criticizing Islam was politically unpopular.<sup>28</sup>

The role of Islam deepened as Mujib sought to secure the support of other Muslim countries, the majority of which warily viewed the Bengali freedom effort as an effort to destroy Pakistan and divide the Muslim world. Mujib needed this external assistance to help develop Bangladesh's flagging economy and to prop up his legitimacy at home. In 1973, Mujib mustered considerable efforts during a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Algiers to obtain formal recognition from and the eventual support of several Arab countries.<sup>29</sup> His efforts to emplace Bangladesh in the comity of Islamic states further fructified when Bangladesh was included in the Organization of the Islamic Conference and participated in its second summit in Lahore in 1974.

While the support of Saudi Arabia remained elusive, by the eve of the summit, Bangladesh had been recognized by Pakistan, Iran and Turkey.<sup>30</sup> Wary of losing newfound aid from the so-called Islamic bloc, Mujib's government abjured criticizing Islam aggressively and became more permissive of Islamist movements. The possibilities of employment for Bangladeshi expatriate labour in oil-rich Gulf states and the remittances such opportunities afforded buttressed these attitudes further. Despite the efforts of some Bangladeshi politicians to firmly embed secularism in Bangladeshi society and systems of education, Bangladeshis increasingly viewed secularism as being synonymous with dishonouring Islam and tantamount to dependence upon India.<sup>31</sup>

Despite Mujib's efforts to shore up the country's economy and secure external support, fragmented opposition movements—which



often operated through the aforementioned aid, charity or relief organizations—consolidated as public support for secularism, the AL generally and Mujib in particular, declined.<sup>32</sup> Religious schools, the media and the ubiquity of Islam in family and social life subsequently contributed to a growing consensus in support of Islam and away from secularism. Huque and Akhter argue that as scepticism towards secularism grew, ‘political parties and leaders competed with one another to be in tune with the society and its rulers, thus strengthening Islam as a factor in the power struggle in Bangladesh’.<sup>33</sup> Mujib was assassinated during an August 1975 military coup. Khandakar Moshtaque Ahmad became president for less than three months before a counter-coup brought Major General Ziaur Rahman (usually called Ziaur) to power in late 1975. He remained in power until 1981.

Bangladesh’s external ties to Arab Gulf states intensified under Ziaur’s tenure, in part because he believed such support was necessary for legitimacy at home and abroad. To establish more productive ties with Muslim states and to woo Saudi Arabia, Ziaur made crucial constitutional changes. He inserted a clause into Article 25 of the 1972 Constitution that formally stated Bangladesh’s solidarity with other Muslim countries<sup>34</sup> (Khan 1976). He also reversed the country’s secular orientation by changing the Constitution in 1977 to remove the preamble’s reference to secularism in favour of the words ‘absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah’.<sup>35</sup> In 1978, he tried to bolster his government’s legitimacy by founding the BNP as an alternative to the AL.

The BNP promoted Bangladeshi nationalism, which was ‘explicitly Islamic in character’, instead of the secular Bengali nationalism favoured by the AL.<sup>36</sup> However, the BNP lacked both ideological clarity and unity. Instead, it was born largely out of what Siddiqi calls ‘the politics of grievance’: its followers had little

in common except a strong opposition to the AL.<sup>37</sup> The party became enormously influential in Bangladesh despite its ambiguous principles because it allowed the political opposition to consolidate into a party that could oppose the powerful AL. The AL and the BNP have been fierce rivals ever since.

Between 1976 and 1979, Ziaur also legalized religious political parties and allowed the Islamists who had worked with the Pakistani army during the liberation war to participate in government again. BJeI was able to publicly re-join Bangladeshi politics in 1979.<sup>38</sup> The changes were part of a strategy to win political popularity by appealing to Islam. What makes BJeI different from Islamists in Iran or the Islamic State, which believed in coercing their versions of Islamic law upon a resisting population, is that the BJeI rejects such top-down imposition of Sharia. BJeI (as well as the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan) believes that Sharia should only be imposed after a majority of voters vote for the party and their goals of making Islamic law the basis of the state. BJeI is an inherently grassroots organization that seeks to Islamize the country from the bottom-up.<sup>39</sup> It is their overt Islamizing agenda that disquiets more secular Bangladeshis.

While Ziaur's efforts to appear less corrupt and more legitimate failed, he did facilitate the growth of more radical Islamist groups in the country by turning a blind eye to their criminal abuses, both because he wanted their political support and because he feared alienating Islamists and pious Bangladeshis<sup>40</sup> (Singh 2015). By the time Ziaur was assassinated in 1981, reliance on Islam to build nationalism and bolster the government's legitimacy was commonplace.

General Hossain Mohammad Ershad (Ershad), Bangladesh's second military dictator, who was in power from 1982 to 1990, continued consolidating Bangladesh's ties with Muslim countries and extended Ziaur's project of embedding Islam in Bangladesh's

governance. Most importantly, Ershad declared Islam to be Bangladesh's state religion and he denervated BJeI as a legitimate political actor. Ershad even appointed two war criminals from the BJeI (Abdul Mannan and Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury) to cabinet positions.<sup>41</sup>

From the eras of Mujib to Ershad, association with the BJeI did not just grant political legitimacy—it also made it easier to obtain aid from oil-rich Middle Eastern countries. While Arab Gulf state monies helped Bangladesh financially through aid and expatriate labour opportunities, they also financed new mosques and madrasas, the upkeep of old religious buildings, and the general propagation of Islamic values through Islamic social institutions that expanded the presence of Islam in everyday life.<sup>42</sup>

A popular uprising toppled Ershad's military government in 1990, and democracy replaced fifteen years of military rule. Although the leaders of the AL and the BNP had temporarily united with each other and some Islamist parties to bring Ershad down, the fissures between the AL and the BNP quickly re-emerged. By 1991, the AL and the BNP were the two main political parties in newly democratic Bangladesh. They remained intense rivals and their duelling ideologies turned vitriolic.

The BNP was victorious in the 1991 elections. Unfortunately, the chasm between the religious Bangladeshi nationalism propounded by the BNP and the secular Bengali nationalism espoused by the AL widened in subsequent years. Both parties boycotted Parliament at different times to undermine the elected government of the competition, turning to what Siddiqi calls 'violence and extra-legal means' to assert themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Since 1990, Bangladesh's civil societies and political actors have struggled to define the role of Islam within the polity and the state, with proponents of secularism pitted against those who want to see

greater formalization of Islam in state and society.<sup>44</sup> With the country nearly split in its support for the two parties, neither party can win an election without coalitions. Electoral politics and Bangladesh's first-past-the post system have empowered the BJeI and other Islamist political parties as both parties have sought to align with them in an effort to secure adequate seats in the national assembly to form the government.<sup>45</sup>

Remarking upon the zero-sum nature of their competition, Riaz observed that 'the relentless acrimony between the AL and the BNP, since 1991, and the pursuance of the politics of expediency, by both parties, enabled the Islamists to rise as a formidable force in the political arena'<sup>46</sup> (Riaz 2005, 234). Perhaps the most worrying episode occurred during the tenure of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's bid for her second tenure as prime minister. She aligned with the BJeI to secure adequate seats to form the government.

As kingmakers, BJeI was able to exact two cabinet positions even though it won only seventeen seats in the 350-seat body and garnered a meagre 4.28 per cent of the vote.<sup>47</sup> It was also during Zia's tenure that Bangladesh experienced widespread Islamist terrorism. Analysts such as Raiz contend that her reliance upon Islamist parties like the BJeI, which had ties to militant groups, made her unwilling to take on Islamist terrorism in the country.<sup>48</sup>

Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League won the 2008 general election with an absolute majority, due in large measure to the widespread antipathy towards the BNP-BJeI government and the reign of Islamist terror it ushered. Hasina began to take steps to fulfil several electoral promises. One of her manifesto pledges was the prosecution of war criminals from the 1971 war. In 2009, her government revived a procedure in the 1973 Constitution for prosecuting war criminals, which became known as the International Crimes Tribunal. In 2010, the first indictment was issued against

Mr Delawar Hossain Sayedee, a BJeI leader and parliamentarian. In February 2013, he was found guilty of genocide, murder and rape during the 1971 war and was sentenced to death. His death sentence sparked protests throughout the country, leaving more than 100 persons dead. In 2014, his sentenced was commuted to life in prison.<sup>49</sup>

Between 2010 and 2018, the tribunal delivered judgments in thirty-four cases against eighty-three alleged war criminals, resulting in fifty-two death sentences.<sup>50</sup> Cases are still being heard and new complaints investigated. The majority of the convicted are from the Awami League's key political opponents: the BJeI and the BNP. Hasina now stands accused of using the tribunal as an effective way to eliminate her political foes as she consolidates one-woman rule over the country.<sup>51</sup>

In 2011, her government moved to restore secularism. This move was facilitated by two Supreme Court rulings in 2011 which declared General Zia's controversial fifth and General Ershad's eighth amendments as unconstitutional and void, restoring the 1972 Constitution's four basic principles of democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism. The court argued that these 'changes were fundamental in nature and changed the very basis of our war for liberation and also defaced the Constitution altogether', while transforming Bangladesh into a 'theocratic state' and 'betray(ing) one of the dominant causes for the war of liberation of Bangladesh'.<sup>52</sup>

However, Hasina approved a bill that sought to retain 'Islam as the state religion' and the phrase 'Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim', over the objection of two ministers who opposed this move on the simple argument that retaining them was in violent opposition to the principle of secularism. Hasina defended her decision to retain these two provisions on the basis of 'ground reality'.<sup>53</sup>

Since then, Hasina has continued her relentless war on the BJeI and the BNP with considerable public support; however, she has had to continue retrenching from her commitment to secularism following robust protests by HI, which was a previously unknown Deobandi Islamist movement moored in the country's unregulated *qawmi* madrasas. Hasina quickly moved to not only appease but also co-opt the group, both as a means to quell allegations that she and her party are anti-Islam and pro-India, and to ensure that the organization does not undertake destabilizing activities.<sup>54</sup> This has resulted in what Lorch has described as Islamization by otherwise purportedly secular elites.<sup>55</sup>

### **Bangladesh's Coexistence Problem**

As discussed above, 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's religious minorities.<sup>56</sup>

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

per cent) and another 4 per cent 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 the 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).<sup>57</sup>

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).<sup>58</sup>

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 per cent of the overall population of West Pakistan and 23.2 per cent of East Pakistan. Hindus, who were 12.9 per cent of Pakistan's overall population, were predominantly concentrated in East Pakistan, where they were 22 per cent of the population (Rizvi 1981).<sup>59</sup>

A decade later, per the 1961 census, religious minorities were 10.7 per cent 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 per cent of the population there. In West Pakistan, religious minorities remained steady at 1.6 per cent of the population, the vast majority of whom were Christian (Rizvi 1981; Sanaullah 1962).<sup>60</sup>

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, p. 292).<sup>61</sup>

According to the most recent Bangladeshi census of 2011, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians comprised 8.5 per cent, 0.6 per cent and 0.3 per cent, respectively, of the population (Haider, Rahman and Kamal 2019).<sup>62</sup> The ongoing oppression and even ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Bangladesh has largely gone unremarked by western scholars (Feldman 2016).<sup>63</sup> Buddhists as well as Christians have also been affected by the ongoing erosion of religious freedom (Akins 2020).<sup>64</sup>

While communal violence has been a long-standing concern in Bangladesh, so is sectarianism. In Bangladesh, sectarianism has had two guises. The first is ongoing violence against Ahmadis (also called Ahmadiyya, Ahmedis), whom many Muslims throughout the world revile as blasphemers (among other equally unsavoury monikers), because they do not recognize the ordinal finality of the Prophet and recognize a nineteenth-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 worship mosques, among other similar restrictions. Ahmadis 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).<sup>65</sup>

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 various Sufi shrines and those who worship in them (Akins 2020).<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup>

One notable victim of this law is the Sufi folk singer Shariat Sarker, who was arrested in January 2020 under the DSA after an Islamic scholar filed charges that comments made by Sarker, and uploaded to YouTube after a December 2019 performance, hurt the ‘religious sentiments’ of Muslims.

The offending remarks included arguments that the Qur’an does not prohibit music and statements he has made against religion being used as a political tool. Sarker was jailed for six months and remains in hiding following death threats. Other Sufi singers, such as Rita Dewan, have also been targeted under this law; she too lives in incessant fear of death threats from vigilantes who have called for her beheading, among other forms of murder.<sup>68</sup>

## **Data and Analytical Methods**

To exposit sectarian and communal intolerance in Bangladesh, we employ survey data derived from a face-to-face, nationally representative survey of 4,067 Bangladeshis (547 of whom were non-Muslim), fielded in Bangla (Bengali), which is the country’s national language, by gender-appropriate teams. The survey was

conducted under 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-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 12 and 30 April 2017. For this analysis, we use only the Muslim respondents.

The local contractor, who wishes to remain anonymous given the hostile climate for such research in Bangladesh, employed a stratified random sampling design that was nationally representative at division levels (Bangladesh has eight divisions). Sample ratios were 50 per cent male and 50 per cent female and 75 per cent rural and 25 per cent 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 per cent, which is similar to comparable surveys in Bangladesh which have a recorded response rate of 75 per cent.

The study team originally sought to sample 8,000 respondents; however, nearly halfway through the survey effort, local authorities objected to survey questions about the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami

and insisted that those be removed as a condition of permitting the study to continue. The team discontinued further enrolments, both for scientific reasons and because the distribution of the sample that had been collected was representative of Bangladesh's 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 per cent at a 5 per cent level of significance. The margin of error for the reduced sample was 1.54 per cent at a 5 per cent 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.<sup>69</sup>

### **Variables Analysis**

First, we assess several questions about Bangladeshi preferences for governance and religious influence in the same. To expost respondents' preferred models of governance, we use Q910, which asks respondents about their governance preferences, specifically 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).<sup>70</sup> The response category of 'democratically elected religious leader' reflects the political philosophy of BJeI, which is to Islamize Bangladesh with the consent of the public through fair elections.<sup>71</sup> '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 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 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, as well as non-Muslims. Q985 asks if respondents favour or oppose using physical punishments (hudood punishments) such as whippings and cutting off hands for various crimes such as theft. Q990 similarly asks respondents whether they favour or oppose stoning persons who commit adultery, which is another hudood punishment. Results are in Table 3, 4, 5 and 6, respectively.

We use two questions to assess respondent beliefs about the extent to which laws in Bangladesh follow the prescriptions of Sharia (Q175) 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 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 7a-7c.

Second, we employ several survey items that first assess communal intolerance, that is to say, Muslim intolerance towards non-Muslims. Our first measure of communal intolerance is from D300, which asks whether the respondent believes 'Non-Muslims and Muslims should be allowed to inter-marry freely' (Table 8). To understand respondents' willingness to let non-Muslims pursue their faith aspirations, we use question Q930, which queries respondents whether they believe 'Muslims have a duty to try and convert others to Islam' (Table 9).

Presumably one of the most foundational ways of othering of fellow citizens is a belief that non-Muslims will not go to heaven in the afterlife. Survey item Q935 (Table 10) addresses this foundational othering. It asks respondents whether 'Islam is the one, truth faith leading to eternal life in heaven' or whether 'Many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven' or 'neither/both equally'. This question speaks directly to the notion discussed above of 'minimalist tolerance'.

Third, we assess those survey items that assess sectarian intolerance, that is to say, intolerance towards Muslims who follow

different interpretative traditions. The first question that we use to assess sectarian intolerance is D310, which asks respondents whether ‘Sunnis and Shias should be allowed to inter-marry freely’ (Table 11). For many Muslims, it is apostasy and punishable by death to leave Islam. To assess Bangladeshi Muslims’ support for other Muslims to pursue their own religious interests, we use Q975, which asks respondents whether they ‘Favour or oppose the death penalty for Bangladesh Muslims who leave Islam’ (Table 12).

A second, related question pertains to Muslims’ willingness to embrace—not just tolerate—internal differences within Islam. Q940 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 13).

We analyse these survey items principally through analysis of frequency distributions, unless otherwise noted. All empirical results are in the tables below.

**Table 1. Tabulation of Q910**

Q910 Some feel that we should rely on a democratic form of government to solve ...	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Democratic leader	1784	51.15	51.15
Non-democratic, strong, secular leader	151	4.33	55.48
Democratically elected religious leader	1521	43.61	99.08
Non-democratic religious leader	32	0.92	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 2. Tabulation of Q178**

Q178. In your opinion, should Muslims and non-Muslims in Bangladesh be subject to the sharia (or Islamic law), or should - only be applied to Muslims?	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Both Muslims and non-Muslim	1809	51.86	51.86
Muslims only	1679	48.14	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 3. Tabulation of Q915**

Q915 In your opinion, how much influence should religious leaders ...?	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Large influence	1460	41.86	41.86
Some influence	1546	44.32	86.18
Not too much influence	326	9.35	95.53
No influence at all	156	4.47	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 4. Tabulation of Q970**

Q970 Do you favour or oppose giving Muslim leaders such as imams, the power to ...	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Completely favour	1421	40.74	40.74
Somewhat favour	1134	32.51	73.25
Somewhat oppose	406	11.64	84.89
Completely oppose	527	15.11	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	



**Table 5. Tabulation of Q985**

Q985 Do you favour or oppose punishments like whippings and cutting off of hands ...	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Completely favour	1944	55.73	55.73
Somewhat favour	687	19.70	75.43
Somewhat oppose	402	11.53	86.96
Completely oppose	455	13.04	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 6. Tabulation of Q990**

Q990 Do you favour or oppose stoning people who commit adultery?	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Completely favour	2308	66.17	66.17
Somewhat favour	586	16.80	82.97
Somewhat oppose	250	7.17	90.14
Completely oppose	344	9.86	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 7a. Tabulation of Q175**

Q175. In your opinion, how closely, if at all, do the laws in Bangladesh follow ...	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Very closely	887	25.43	25.43
Somewhat closely	1547	44.35	69.78
Not too closely	740	21.22	91.00
Not at all closely	314	9.00	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 7b. Tabulation of Q176**

Q176. And, in your opinion, is this good thing or a bad thing?	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Good thing	2448	70.18	70.18
Bad thing	979	28.07	98.25
Neither	61	1.75	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 7c. Tabulation of Q176 Q175b**

Q176. And, in your opinion, is this good thing or a bad thing?	Are Bangladesh' Laws Sharia Compliant		
	Yes	No	Total
Good thing	2224	224	2448
Bad thing	178	801	979
Neither	32	29	61
Total	2434	1054	3488

**Table 8. Tabulation of D300**

D-300. In your opinion, should non-Muslims and Muslims be allowed to inter-marry	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Yes	246	7.05	7.05
No	3242	92.95	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 9. Tabulation of Q930**

Q930 Here is a statement. Muslims have a duty to try and convert others to Islam.	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Completely agree	2452	70.30	70.30
Mostly agree	571	16.37	86.67
Mostly disagree	158	4.53	91.20
Completely disagree	307	8.80	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 10. Tabulation of Q935**

Q935 Now I'm going to read you two statements. Please tell me whether the ...	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Islam is the one, true faith leading to eternal life in heaven	2641	75.72	75.72
Many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven	780	22.36	98.08
Neither/both equally	67	1.92	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 11. Tabulation of D310**

D-310. In your opinion, should Sunnis and Shia be allowed to inter-marry freely?	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Yes	1404	40.25	40.25
No	2084	59.75	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 12. Tabulation of Q975**

Q975 Do you favour or oppose the death penalty for Bangladesh Muslims who ...	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
Completely favour	1911	54.79	54.79
Somewhat favour	526	15.08	69.87
Somewhat oppose	437	12.53	82.40
Completely oppose	614	17.60	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

**Table 13. Tabulation of Q940**

Q940 Now I'm going to read you two additional statements. Please tell me ...	Freq.	Per cent	Cum.
There is only <i>one</i> true way to interpret the teachings of Islam	1393	39.94	39.94
There is <i>more</i> than one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam	2084	59.75	99.68
Neither/both equally	11	0.32	100.00
Total	3488	100.00	

## Results

What do these survey items tell us about respondents' preferences for governance and religious influence in the same? From Q910 (Table 1), we see that while a slim majority (51.15 per cent) preferred a democratic leader, a large minority (43.61) preferred a democratically elected religious (Muslim) leader.

When asked whether non-Muslims should be subject to Islamic law (Q178, Table 2), respondents were neatly divided, with a majority (51.86 per cent) saying that both should be subject to

Islamic law and 48.14 per cent indicating that it should only apply to Muslims. Analysis of Q915 (Table 3) demonstrates that a large majority of respondents also believe that religious leaders should have 'a large influence' (41.86 per cent) or 'some influence' in matters of political governance while a meagre 4.47 per cent said 'no influence at all'.

The distribution of responses to Q970 shows that a large majority either 'completely favour' (40.74) or 'somewhat favour' (32.51 per cent) giving Muslim imams the power to decide family and property disputes, with 15.11 per cent completely oppose doing so (Table 4). Large majorities (55.73 per cent) also favour or 'somewhat favour' (19.70 per cent) using physical punishments (whipping, amputations), whereas 13.04 per cent oppose doing so (Q985, Table 5). Large majorities also 'completely favour' (66.17 per cent) or 'somewhat favour' (16.80 per cent) stoning persons for adultery while fewer than one in ten (9.8 per cent) oppose doing so (Q990, Table 6).

Our conjoint analysis of Q175 and Q176 (Tables 7a-7c) assesses respondent beliefs about the degree to which Bangladeshi laws accord with Islamic law or Sharia. On the issue of compliance, respondents were split: about one in four (25.43 per cent) believe Bangladeshi laws 'very closely' follow Islamic law, while 21.22 per cent and 9.00 per cent indicated that laws are 'not too closely' or 'not at all closely' aligned with Islamic law, respectively. The plurality (44.35 per cent) indicated that they 'somewhat' align (Table 7a). Of the 2,434 respondents who indicated that Bangladeshi laws are sharia-compliant, the vast majority (2,224) believed this is a good thing. Of the 1,054 respondents who thought the country's laws were not Sharia-compliant, most (801) thought this was a bad thing.

What do these survey data tell us about sectarian intolerance? Per our analysis of D300, the vast majority (92.95) of Bangladeshis

oppose Muslims and non-Muslims freely intermarrying (Table 8). We learn from responses to Q930 (Table 9) that the vast majority of Muslim Bangladeshis are not content letting non-Muslims pursue their faith aspirations, as a vast majority either 'completely agree' (70.30 per cent) or 'mostly agree' (16.37 per cent) that Muslims have a duty to convert non-Muslims, whereas 4.53 per cent 'mostly disagree' and 8.80 per cent 'totally disagree' that Muslims have such a duty.

Consistent with the belief that Muslims should convert non-Muslims, analysis of Q935 (Table 10), a solid majority (75.72 per cent) said that they believe that Islam is the 'one, truth faith leading to eternal life in heaven' whereas 22.36 per cent thought that 'many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven' (the balance of 1.92 per cent did not commit to either position). This finding strongly undermines even a basic level of tolerance for those with different religious beliefs, with most respondents believing that non-Muslims will not go to heaven in their afterlife. This is arguably one of the most foundational otherings that can exist in a polity.

Our analyses show that while respondents are extremely intolerant of non-Muslims, they are also intolerant towards Muslims of differing sectarian commitments, although sectarian intolerance is less severe than communal intolerance. As responses to D30 illustrates (Table 11), Bangladeshi Muslims were more divided on the issue of intermarriage between Sunnis and Shias than they were about Muslims marrying non-Muslims: 40.25 per cent believe that they should be able to freely intermarry while the majority (59.75 per cent) opposed such intermarriage.

A solid majority of respondents (54.79 per cent) said they 'completely favour' and another 15.08 per cent said they 'somewhat favour' the death penalty for those Muslims who leave the faith,

whereas 12.53 per cent ‘somewhat oppose’ and another 17.60 per cent ‘completely oppose’ doing so.

Whereas we saw the vast majority of Bangladeshi Muslims cannot countenance the idea that non-Muslims will experience an eternal life in heaven, they are somewhat more tolerant when it comes to the beliefs of other Muslims. Responses to Q940 show that a majority (59.75 per cent) believed there is plurality in the teachings of Islam while 39.94 per cent believed that there is only one true way to interpret Islam’s teachings (eleven respondents [0.32 per cent] refused to commit to either position).

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Despite Bangladesh’s reputation for being a so-called ‘moderate Muslim country’ with a robust tradition of secularism and democracy,<sup>72</sup> there is very little evidence of this often-lauded moderate Islam. The various survey items that we analyse here show a consistent set of patterns.

First, Bangladeshis overwhelmingly prefer more Sharia in governance of their country and larger roles for religious leaders. They also support harsh punishments which are often called hudood punishments, such as whipping, amputation and stoning. Our survey data show overwhelming support for applying these laws to non-Muslims as well. While the respondents in our survey evince severe intolerance towards non-Muslims using an array of measures, they are somewhat less intolerant of differences across sects of Islam.

There is little in these data that motivate optimism. As our background review of Bangladesh shows, the country’s experiments with democracy and secularism were seriously eroded by the end of the 1970s. Despite Supreme Court rulings that vacated the Islamizing amendments under the military regimes of Zia and Ershad, Sheikh

Hasina did not exploit these rulings to return Bangladesh to the secular democracy that the 1972 Constitution envisioned. Instead, she has chosen to retain Islam as the state religion and, in her zeal to extirpate the BJeI, she has chosen to patronize an equally dangerous suite of Islamist actors for her own purposeful gains.



# Notes

## Introduction

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