THE GEOPOLITICS OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the historical root of a failed military coup, undertaken by a few Islamists in an attempt to overthrow the present secular government of Bangladesh in 2012. This article argues that the root for secular-Islamist conflict in Bangladesh is closely connected to geopolitical events such as the Cold War and the Yom Kippur War, when military rulers of the state systematically promoted Islamic culture and values in the public discourse to legitimize their own regimes.

INTRODUCTION

On January 19, 2012, at a press conference held in the capital city of Dhaka, the Bangladeshi military announced that it foiled a military coup, attempted by retired and serving officers, intent on toppling the present secular government of the Awami League (AL), as headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.1 The aim of the failed military coup was to install Sharia law in the country by denouncing secular political forces.2 The military interest in civil politics is hardly new in Bangladesh, as military rule, either direct or indirect, has been in place for sixteen of Bangladesh’s forty years as an independent country (1975-1990 and 2006-2008). To date, however, the military had never held a press conference about a failed coup. For the first time, a support base of Islamists within the military was publicly acknowledged, and at the same time, the military reaffirmed its commitment to democracy.

This paper traces the historical root of this failed military coup and finds that the Islamization of Bangladesh’s secular political discourse is closely connected to geopolitical events that took place from 1975 through the 1990s. The reason behind choosing this specific time frame is two-fold: a) Bangladesh was under military control during this period

2 Ibid.

The above picture, kindly provided by Abir Abdullah, shows a mass gathering in Biswa Ijtema in January 2012.
and b) though political Islam had flourished in Bangladesh after the 1990s, equally significant to this time period were the Cold War and the Yom Kippur War, during which foreign governments fueled Islamization in Bangladesh. The present failed coup, therefore, can be read as a result of political decisions taken in the past by Bangladeshi regimes in regard to foreign policy and geopolitics.

I have two propositions in this paper. First, I argue that the Yom Kippur War in the early 1970s had a profound impact on Bangladesh, specifically in terms of the promotion of systematic Islamic cultural values in the national discourse. The second proposition argues that the Taliban’s Holy Jihad against the Soviets, against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s, had a strong influence on the growth of Bangladeshi Islamists, who later captured significant power within the Islamized political discourse. The central hypothesis of this paper, therefore, argues that the 2012 failed military coup is the outcome of Bangladesh’s Islamization process as initiated by two Military juntas – Ziaur Rahman and Hussein Muhammad Ershad – and that this Islamization process is the result of Bangladesh’s foreign policy shift, as influenced by geopolitical events such as the Yom Kippur and Cold Wars. This paper further finds that the literature on the history of Islam and politics in Bangladesh, specifically with respect to geopolitics and its relation to foreign policy, remains unexplored and understudied. The hypothesis of this paper, however, is nonetheless developed upon existing literatures.

With a succinct overview of Bangladesh, this paper presents the process of Islamization in Bangladesh through the lense of the military regimes of 1975 to 1990. Next, I analyze the impact of Islamization in Bangladeshi society, culture, and politics. In the final section, I construct the central hypothesis of this paper with historical evidence.³

³ For the purpose of clarity, I will define the terms “geopolitics,” “political Islam,” “Islamization,” and “Islamist” as follows:

Geopolitics: The impact of world affairs not taking place in Bangladesh on the national politics of Bangladesh.

Political Islam: The political movements surrounding the development of ideology and the setting of political goals rooted in a literal analysis of 7th-century sources core to Islam, including the Quran, the prophetic traditions of Muhammad, and the prophetic sayings preserved in the Hadith.

Islamization: The cultural expansion of Arab and Persian civilization.

Islamist: The political movement and the people contributing to and participating in the political efforts of political Islam.

BANGLADESH: AN OVERVIEW

In terms of countries with a majority Muslim population, Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim country in the world. During the British colonial period, from 1757 to 1947, Bangladesh was part of the Indian subcontinent and known as East Bengal; in the post-colonial period, from 1947 to 1971, it was part of Pakistan and known as East Pakistan. Bangladesh has emerged as an independent country based on the “secular-nationalist” principle, following a bloody nine-month long war with Pakistan in 1971. Economically, Bangladesh is among the world’s poorest nations with a per capita income of $520.⁴ According to the website of the Bangladeshi government, “it has a population of 140 million, where 88% of the people are Muslims and over 98% of the people speak Bangla.”⁵ Upon gaining independence in 1971, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh adopted the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy.⁶ The President of Bangladesh is chief of the state, and the Prime Minister head of the Government. The present legal and judicial system of Bangladesh owes its origin to two hundred years of British rule in the Indian subcontinent, although some elements are remnants of the Pre-British period tracing back to Hindu and Muslim rule.⁷

The country has a troubled past of military intervention in civil politics. Of the country’s forty years of existence as an independent country, military juntas have either directly or indirectly ruled the country for more than sixteen years (1975-1990 and 2006-2008). In terms of political parties, a total of thirty-two parties are currently registered in the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC). However, the politics of Bangladesh is dominated by two parties – the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).⁸ The largest Islamist party, the Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islami (BJI) said to be the third most influential party. The BNP is now heading a right-leaning eighteen-party electoral alliance, which encompasses most Islamist parties, including


⁵ Ibid.


the BJI. Conversely, the secular AL is leading a fourteen-party grand alliance that includes the major left-leaning parties in the country. Thus, a sharp polarization between the secular and the non-secular is vivid in the Bangladeshi political scene. The following section provides a historic account of this dynamic in Bangladeshi politics.

**THE TRANSFORMATION FROM THE SECULAR TO THE ISLAMIC**

After forming the first government of independent Bangladesh in 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, deceased leader of the AL and father of present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, touted nationalism, socialism, secularism, and democracy as four state principals by inserting them into the constitution. The Bengali word corresponding to secularism was *Dharma Nirupokhota*, literally meaning “religious neutrality.” Later, these four principals were propagated by the government as “Mujibism.” Mujibism was used to counter the growing popularity of the radical left, who argued for a scientific socialism as state policy. Mujibism was further used in opposition to communal politics seeking to suppress the BJI, with a key allegation against the party being collaboration with the Pakistani military during the war for independence in 1971. Mujibism had serious political implications for non-secular parties, such as the BJI, which was banned under the constitutional assertion of secularism.

The first five-year plan of the country, spanning the period from 1973 to 78 explains the motive behind secularism:

> True to our secular belief, we stand committed to disband all communal forces from the body politic. The war of liberation against the colonial oppressors, which we waged as one man, demonstrated that Bangladesh is able to rise above religious bigotry and differences of caste and creed. Even though decades of obscurantism and religious fanaticism cannot be obliterated in one day, such bigotry will not be able to thrive on the soil of Bangladesh as communalism ceases to be a political weapon. Our struggle for emancipation has highlighted our homogeneity and our struggle against poverty will only strengthen it.12

As O’Connell argues, this statement is a manifestation of state ideology, which goes beyond the separation of religion and politics: it shows the AL’s commitment to disband the BJI forever.

However, this theory of Mujibism lacks any philosophical thesis.13 Moreover, three major controversial actions regarding national administration lessened the regime’s support and produced other groups, including the radical left, which challenged its legitimacy through armed violence.14 Those controversial actions included the creation of the Jatiyo Rakhi Bahini (JRB), a personal paramilitary troop comprised of members of the AL; the politicization of bureaucracy; and state patronization of the AL workers. Firstly, the JRB, vested with tremendous power and relatively free from accountability, quickly become associated with terrorizing tactics and recognized as a means of quashing resistance to the regime.15 Secondly, the AL had begun to purge perceived rivals and enemies working at the civil service by pushing through a presidential order that removed constitutional protection of civil servants.16 As a result, bureaucrats could be removed at any time at the will of the government without the right to appeal to the court.17 In this way, bureaucrats supporting the AL had begun to enjoy benefits from the government unjust in comparison to critics of the government. According to my analysis, Sheikh Mujib set a trend of politicizing the bureaucracy, characteristic of all governments formed since his time. A study conducted in 2008 on the governance of Bangladesh comes to a similar conclusion. The 2008 study finds that all governments of independent Bangladesh adopted adversarial stances against alleged supporters or sympathizers of the opposition in the civil service by tampering with their promotions and placements or denying them career incentives, such as overseas training and key appointments.18 Finally, the AL government had appointed its loyalists as administrators of the banks, companies, jute, textiles, and sugar mills.19

On the other hand, the overall economic condition of the country was deteriorating due to inefficient management of the economy and the state. In 1974, Finance Minister Tajuddin Ahmed stated publicly that the economy of the country has almost broken down,20 fueling the anti-government movement by the radical left who intensified their...

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15 Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi, “Political Culture in contemporary Bangladesh,” 10.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.


20 Ibid., 119.
ongoing armed movement to overthrow the government.\textsuperscript{21} According to an estimate in 1974, the radical leftists had killed approximately 3000 AL leaders and workers, including four members of Parliament.\textsuperscript{22} In 1974, the government took two controversial steps: the declaration of a state emergency in December 1974 and the introduction of a one-party system in 1975 to control resentment from parts of the civil service, the military (a significant portion of the military were not happy about state patronization of the JRB over the military), and the radical leftists. However, a brutal military coup killed Mujib and eighteen members of the Mujib family on August 15, 1975.

After the murder of Mujib, Army General Ziaur Rahman took power. Rahman, known popularly as President Zia, later formed the BNP with participation from anti-AL constituents and restored the multi-party system during his presidency in 1979. Soon after, Zia amended Mujib’s vision of the constitution and took further steps to make a clear distinction between his regime and the Mujib regime. Zia had officially oriented Bangladesh towards Islam, removing secularism from the constitution and replacing it with absolute trust and faith in Allah, as well as the insertion of \textit{Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim} (In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful).\textsuperscript{23} Zia also amended the definition of nationality defined in Mujib’s regime, declaring a “Bangladeshi nationalism” instead of “Bengali nationalism.”\textsuperscript{24} The national identity thus became linked with territorial boundaries, distinguishing Bengali Muslims from the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal.\textsuperscript{25} In other words, Zia endorsed the spirit of Islamic nationalism by asserting it in the constitution. Without naming Islam, the constitution was made Islamic.\textsuperscript{26} Zia’s decisions as a whole conveyed a clear message – that “Islam is at the heart of Bangladesh.” Later, when military general Hussein Muhammad Ershad took power with the assassination of Major Zia in 1981, Islam was declared the state religion. Like Zia, Ershad established a political party and named it the Jatiyo Party (JP).

Below, I summarize some of the steps taken by Zia and Ershad to promote Islam in Bangladesh between 1975 and 1990:\textsuperscript{27}

• Once again allowing the religious parties to participate in elections with an official order on May 4, 1976, causing the BJI to announce their comeback publicly

\begin{itemize}
  \item Both Zia and Ershad’s public demonstration of faith by taking part in Friday prayer (\textit{Jumma} prayer)
  \item Bangladesh’s rise as an influential member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the three-member Al-Quds Committee, and the Islamic Solidarity Front\textsuperscript{28}
  \item The promotion of the recitation of the Quran in party meetings and state programs
  \item The establishment of an Islamic University with state patronage
  \item The establishment of the Madrasah Education Board to oversee madrasah education and curricula
  \item The introduction of Islamiat, a mandatory Islamic studies course for all Muslim students at the primary- and secondary-school levels (grades 1 through 8)
  \item The establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs to coordinate religious activities on behalf of the government
  \item The declaration of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, \textit{Eid Milad-un-Nabi}, as a national holiday
  \item The broadcast of the Azan by state-controlled electronic media
  \item The inclusion of Islamists in the state cabinet
  \item The establishment of the Islamic Foundation and an extensive network of research facilities
  \item The establishment of a Zakat Fund headed by the president and the disbursement of large funds for the construction of mosques and madrasahs
  \item The declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1987
\end{itemize}

\textbf{ISLAM BECOMES UBQUITOUS IN SOCIETY}

The shift of the state from a secular nationalism to an Islamic-oriented position resulted in an increasing number of madrasahs, mosques, and religious preaching and gatherings (known as \textit{wajmahfils}). Concurrently, apolitical Islam, including the Tabligh Jamaat movement and Sufi culture, had received momentum as well. Apolitical Islam helped foster Islamic culture within society, influencing the political discourse as well. Below, I explain the impact of Islamization in Bangladeshi society.

\textbf{Mosque}

Dhaka is known as the city of mosques. According to a recent statement by the State Minister of Religious Affairs of Bangladesh, the country has 250,399 mosques spread across

\begin{itemize}
  \item The Al-Quds Committee was formed in 1979 with a goal of placing the Baitul Mokadesh Mosque in Jerusalem under Muslim control, as it was the first \textit{Kiblah} (direction of prayers) for Muslims. The last Friday of Ramadhan has been observed as Al-Quds Day throughout the Muslim world since 1979. The Islamic Solidarity Front is an informal sociocultural organization of the Muslim states. Its main objectives are to strengthen fraternal bonds among Muslims and to work for the betterment of the Muslim Ummah. For further information, see Emajuddin Ahamed and D.R.J.A Nazneen, “Islam in Bangladesh,” 797.
\end{itemize}
its territory. Specifically, the state patronage of building new mosques has resulted in a prolific growth of mosques in the country. The ubiquity of mosques serves to underpin the Islamic social consciousness of the country, with the regular recitation of the Azan reinforcing the name of Allah and the prophets in the minds of the masses five times a day. The architectural design of Bangladeshi mosques resembles Arabic architecture, emphasizing the significance of the Islamic heartland in Bangladesh. Unlike in most Middle Eastern Muslim countries, this network of Bangladeshi mosques and madrasas operates outside of state control, often retaining considerable autonomy.

**Sufism**

State funds were also released for the building of Sufi shrines. Huque and Akhter define Sufism as “a mode of religious life in Islam in which the emphasis is placed not so much on the performance of external rituals as on the activities of the inner-self – in other words, it signifies Islamic mysticism.” Sufi Islam in Bangladesh is found on two levels: the first being the folk, populist Sufis of the masses and the second being the intellectual Sufism, a recent movement that rearticulates Islamic metaphysics as an answer to Western materialism. Sufis, dead or alive, are known in Bangladesh as Pir (master) and followers of Pir are known as Murids (disciple). The graves of Pir are known as Mazars (shrines) and Urs rituals, death anniversaries of Sufi saints, take place in such shrines. A large proportion of Muslims in Bangladesh identify themselves with some Pir, and that Pir in Bangladesh exercise enormous spiritual, though not political influence over its Murids. Shrines of Pir are spread across the country, and Urs taking place in those shrines were attended not only by common people but also by the heads of state, including President Ershad, as well as cabinet ministers, generals, top-level bureaucrats, and university professors.

**Wajmahfils**

Wajmahfils play an important role in promoting Islamic knowledge in the country, especially in rural areas. Preachers at such meetings speak about the glory of Islam and the greatness of its Prophet, with the contents of such speeches circulated by word of mouth to those not in attendance. Islamists use these wajmahfils as occasion to promote the ethos of political Islam in Bangladesh. Content analysis of speeches given at wajmahfils by Delwar Hossain Sayeede, a former MP of the BJI now facing trials for crime committed against humanity in the war for independence in 1971, finds that Sayeede provides an ideology-driven, politically motivated interpretation of Islam, as sanctioned by the BJI, thus providing motivation for potential Islamist militants.

**Madrasah Education**

Bangladesh has two types of education systems, the secular and the Islamic madrasah. Scholars writing on Bangladesh tend to agree in connecting madrasah education with the growth of political Islam in the country. Madrasah education is seen to be among the principal educational institutions contributing to the process of socialization in the Islamic culture. Madrasas have long been centers of classical Islamic studies and guardians of the orthodoxy of South Asian Islam.

In Bangladesh today, two types of madrasah education are available: Alia and Quomi. The Alia madrasah curriculum is government-approved and it is divided into four levels: dakhil (secondary school certificate), alim (higher secondary school certificate), fazil (Bachelor of Arts), and kamil (Masters of Arts). These madrasahs run on government support. Degrees awarded by these madrasas are recognized by the government, and their graduates are more likely to find a place in the job market. However, privately managed Quomi (people’s) madrasas teach the Quran, Hadith, Sunnah, and an orthodox interpretation of the Sharia (Islam) to its students. These students are less likely to succeed in the job market.

According to one estimate, government madrasahs have grown over 700%, and student enrollment has jumped by 653% in the period from 1972 to 2004. According to another report, around two million students are enrolled across 15,000 Quomi madrasahs, funded by individuals from countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and the United Kingdom. Increasingly, the trend has been that students and teachers of madrasahs have become major supporter of political Islam in the country.

33 Ibid., 61.
35 Ali Riaz, Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh, 58.
37 Mumtaz Ahmad, “Islam, State and Society,” 55.
38 Ibid., 56.
39 Ali Riaz, Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh, 36.
41 Ali Riaz, Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh, 37.
Tabligh Jamaat Movement

Founded in the early 1900s, Tabligh Jamaat is the world’s largest apolitical movement, illustrated best by drawing a parallel to the Christian missionary movement. The intention of the movement is to reinculcate Islamic ideals among those who are seen as having deviated from the Islamic way of life in search of materialistic gain. Tabligh Muslims are called upon to spend time, generally 3 to 120 days, with a Tabligh Jamaat group controlled by the Kakrail Mosque in Dhaka. Its growth and popularity in Bangladesh is spectacular; the movement draws large crowds from all walks of life, from students and teachers, to doctors and engineers, and even officials and ordinary people. Its annual conference, Biswa Ijtema, is the second largest gathering of Muslims in the world, after the Hajj (see photo). Every year, four million Muslims travel to take part in BiswaIjtema, which takes place on the outskirts of Dhaka.

ISLAM IN BANGLADESHI POLITICS

State-enforced Islamization has two major impacts on the politics of Bangladesh. Firstly, it paves the way for the rapid growth of Islamist parties. The strength of the Islamists has historically challenged secular forces in Bangladeshi politics; the failed military coup in 2012 is a manifestation of such conflict.

Although only eight Islamist parties are currently registered with the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC), the number of Islamist parties who operate covertly and without EC regulation surpasses 100. Riaz divides Islamists into three categories: those who participate in the existing political system, those who work within the democratic political system despite their reservations about it, and those who refuse to take part in constitutional politics and remain clandestine.

The Islamist parties who are registered with the EC include the Jaker Party, BJI, Bangladesh Tarikat Federation, Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon, Bangladesh Muslim League, Jamiate Ulamaye Islam Bangladesh, Islamic Front Bangladesh, and Islami Oikko Jot (IOJ). Compared with the less than 2% of the votes received by other Islamist parties, the BJI received 12.13% and 8.63% of votes during the

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44 Muntaz Ahmad, “Islam, State and Society,” 62.
46 Ali Riaz, Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh, 30.
1991 and 1996 parliamentary elections, respectively. In the 2001 election, the BJI won seventeen seats and the IOJ won two seats as part of the center-right coalition of four-party alliances headed by the BNP.

However, unregistered Islamist parties make headlines for different reasons. On August 17, 2005, Bangladesh experienced its own 9/11 in a shockwave of terror, when a relatively unknown Islamist group, Jamaatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB), detonated 500 bombs simultaneously across the country. Even less known is that pamphlets were left at every bombing spot with demands of establishing the “law of Allah” in the country by abolishing the present democratic system, under the claim that democracy and constituencies are sources of polytheism. The JMB then struck Bangladesh’s judicial system with several suicide bomb attacks, on October 3rd and 8th, and November 14, 2005, murdering four judges to underscore the seriousness of their demands. Another banned outfit of Islamists, Harkatul Jihad Bangladesh (HuJI-B), is accused of a series of terrorist activity, including a grenade attack on the British High Commissioner in Bangladesh in 2004, a failed attempt on the life of renowned secular poet Shamsur Rahman at his Dhaka residence in 1999, another grenade attack in 2004 on an AL rally in Dhaka that killed twenty-three people, and a failed attempt to assassinate Sheikh Hasina. HuJI-B was formed in 1992, reportedly with funds from al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden. The existence of firm links between this group and al-Qaeda was proven when Fazlul Rahman, an Afghan returnee and leader of the HuJI-B, signed the official declaration of holy war against the US in February 1998, other signatories including Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri (leader of the Jihad Group in Egypt), Rifa’i Ahmad Taha (as known as Abu-Yasir, of the Egyptian Islamic Group), and Sheikh Mir Hamzah (secretary of the Jamiat Ulema of Pakistan).

Interestingly, according to the South Asian Terrorism Portal, “at one point of time, the groups issued a slogan, Amra Sobai Hobo Taliban, Bangla Hobe ikhushi hobe Allah (Allah will be pleased if you vote for scale) and BJI supporters chanted Vote diley palla naukarmalik tui Allah (there is no God but Allah, the boat belongs to Allah) and BJI supporters chanted Vote diley palla ikhushi hobe Allah (Allah will be pleased if you vote for scale).” Despite bagging few vote compared to two major parties (the BNP and the AL), against the backdrop of the Islamization of society, culture, and politics, Islamists had emerged not only as influential political players but also as the “kingmakers of Bangladesh politics.”

In an analysis of Islam’s dominance in the political discourse of Bangladesh and the rise of political Islam, Riaz argues that in post-independence Bangladesh, when the ruling AL faced a crisis of legitimacy, they developed a new ideology, instead denouncing secular democracy and abstaining from elections. Conversely, the BJI, the largest Islamist party, in fact operates within the democracy. The same discourse analysis on BJI ideology finds that despite participating within a democracy, the BJI projects serious concerns over many aspects of Western democracy.

Consider the history of Islamists banned by the AL immediately after the independence, as well as the Islamists reaction – specifically the HuJI-B’s attempt on the life of Sheikh Hasina, head of the secular political force of the country. One will find that the Islamization of Bangladesh produced a conflicting political discourse, where both secularists and Islamists thrived. Such conflict continues today. With the fifteenth amendment to the constitution in 2011, the AL government replaced “absolute trust and faith in Allah” with secularism. The AL also jailed top leaders of the BJI, including two past Ministers and its ideological guru, Ghulam Azam, under the accusation of crime against humanity committed during the 1971 war. The secular government further banned the HTB. Seemingly, the secular government of Bangladesh has sought to suppress Islamism, with the Islamists trying to topple the secular government.

Furthermore, the Islamization process influenced the secular political party – the AL. Even Sheikh Hasina, head of the AL, began to express her and her party’s alignment with Islam. Hasina had “begun carrying prayer beads, wearing scarves, and making pilgrimages to Mecca, while emphasizing Islamic greetings ... in her speech.” Analysis of the contents of posters and slogans of the BNP, AL, and BJI before the election of 1991, finds that these political parties attempted to show their indomitable faith in Islam. Riaz notes:

BNP supporters chanted La ilahaillallah dhaner shishe bismillah (There is no God but Allah, vote for a paddy sheaf) saying God the merciful. AL supporters came up with La ilahaillallah naukarmalik tui Allah (there is no God but Allah, the boat belongs to Allah) and BJI supporters chanted Vote diley palla ikhushi hobe Allah (Allah will be pleased if you vote for scale).

48 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Mubashar Hasan, “Historical Developments,” 163.
53 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 BNP’s election symbol
59 AL’s election symbol
60 BJI’s election symbol
Mujibism, based on a cult personality, but failed to create legitimacy. Using the theoretical framework of Gramsci, Riaz further argues that the “failure of the ruling block to provide moral leadership and establish moral superiority resulted in a crisis, and a violent solution to the crisis emerged through the coup d’état of August 1975.”

When military regimes later used Islam in public discourse, it could be seen in terms of the regime’s eternal quest for acquiring legitimacy from the people. Rashiduzzaman, however, differs with Riaz, arguing that the promotion of Islam in Bangladesh and rise of political Islam merely represents the cultural resistance of Muslims to secular nationalists.

ISLAMIZATION, BANGLADESHI FOREIGN POLICY, AND GEOPOLITICS

I find that the reason behind the Islamization of Bangladeshi politics, society, and culture is embedded in its shift in foreign policy from 1975 to 1990. This policy shift is connected with two wars – the Yom Kippur War and the US-led Taliban jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, a ripple of the Cold War. Though the Bangladeshi state was not in existence during the Yom Kippur War, evidence highlights the influence of the defeat in promoting the Islamization of Bangladesh, illegal military regimes using financial support from foreign Muslim countries to legitimate their own regimes while exploiting the Islam of the masses.

With Islam suppressed in the national body politic of Bangladesh during the Cold War in 1972, the Bangladeshi regime was more inclined towards India and the Soviet Union. However, this stance in foreign policy began to shift towards the Islamic heartland – the Middle East. Against the backdrop of economic depression in the country, the regime bid to attract foreign aid by promoting the Muslim and Islamic identity of the country.

Interestingly, Sheikh Mujib initiated this trend of promoting Bangladesh’s Muslim identity abroad. To gain the support and recognition of Arab countries, Mujib’s government sent a doctor’s team to help the Arab nations during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Despite being a secular leader, Sheikh Mujib joined the meeting of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Pakistan and revived the Islamic academy that he himself had abolished. After Mujib’s death in 1975, when military regimes came into the power, unlike Mujib they distanced themselves from close diplomatic ties with India and Soviets at the outset.

Historical facts reveal that without India’s support in military training, arms, soldiers, diplomacy, and humanitarian aid, Bangladesh could not have gained independence within nine months of the war in 1971. India hosted ten million Bangladeshi refugees from April to December of 1971, nine months of the war in 1971. India’s support and recognition of Bangladesh was crucial in gaining international recognition and legitimacy of the new state.

But against the backdrop of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions under the Mujib regime, Khan asserts that for the Muslims of Bangladesh, support had to come from Islam. Khan argues that the government of Sheikh Mujib lost sight of this aspect, trying to substitute Western liberal ideologies for secularism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism. In addition to public discontent about secular ideology, the economy of the country was on the verge of collapse. Bangladesh was in need of foreign support to rebuild its economy, and the oil-rich Middle East was Bangladesh’s only hope in this regard.

Moreover, after the defeat to Israel in the Yom Kippur War, the Middle Eastern countries had begun a global wave of Islamizing foreign countries through aid. The goal was to develop public and government support across the world in support of an Islamic identity. When Zia came into power, he shifted Bangladesh’s foreign policy towards Muslim countries and began to distance Bangladesh from a secular India. Later, President Ershad maintained Zia’s foreign policy towards India and the Middle East. Furthermore, Ershad allied with the US and alienated the socialist Soviets.

After assuming power, Zia asserted the Islamic vision for Bangladesh’s foreign policy in the constitution, backed Bangladeshi freedom fighters by deploying Indian army and war planes against the Pakistani military. Against the backdrop of an ongoing Cold War with the US, the Soviets too backed India’s support for the independence of Bangladesh. The US stayed neutral, actively supporting neither India nor Pakistan due to the Chinese alignment with Pakistan.

Haider identifies several political motives behind India’s armed support of Bangladeshi freedom fighters in 1971: (a) the political enemies on both its borders would be replaced by a far weaker enemy on one side and a friend on the other; (b) secularism would be regarded as the dominant ideology for the developing countries; (c) India would emerge as an Asian superpower; (d) India would establish a subservient government in Bangladesh; and (e) Bangladesh would be an extension of the Indian market.

# Notes

70 Zillur R. Khan, “Islam and Bengali Nationalism,” 848.
71 Ibid.
which says that “the state shall endeavor to consolidate, preserve, and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity.”

In order to win the approval of Middle Eastern countries, military regimes often collaborated with the BJI, which maintained healthy connections with the Middle East. The implications of such a shift culminated into the military regime’s overwhelming dependence on foreign aid, the bulk of which coming from Middle Eastern, oil-rich Islamic fundamentalist countries. Ahmad argues that it was “Bangladesh’s growing cultural and economic relations (aid and the export of labor) with the oil-producing Middle Eastern Muslim countries and Malaysia that spurred state-sponsored Islamic activities, with generous official financial assistance from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).”

Bangladesh’s foreign policy from 1975 to 1990 was successful in that rich Arab and East Asian countries funded Bangladesh well, despite these countries being previously unsupportive of Bangladesh during Mujib’s secular regime. I summarize below some of the key historical events that took place during the military regimes of Bangladesh (1975-1990), which manifested in a strong tie between Bangladesh and rich Muslim countries, an implication of Bangladesh’s shift in foreign policy from India to the Middle East:

- Bangladesh had experienced state visits from high level dignitaries of various Muslim countries. Some of the high profile visits include a three-day visit with President Suharto of Indonesia in 1979; the visiting of foreign ministers and foreign ministry officials from forty-one Muslim countries to Bangladesh to attend the fourteenth Islamic foreign ministers’ conference, held in Dhaka in December 1983; the visit of the President of the UAE and Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat in 1984; and the visit of Turkish PM Turgut Ozal to Bangladesh in 1986.
- The signing of trade deals, including shipping, manufacturing, and industry with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Kuwait, and Indonesia. Saudi Arabia offered $300 million in aid in 1979, and Turkey offered $60 million in loans to buy consumer items and capital machinery from Turkey. In 1985, the Saudi-Bangladesh Joint Economic Commission committed a $62 million loan for oil and gas exploration.
- The Islamic Development Bank (IDB) offered loans to Bangladesh.
- Bangladesh signed an air service agreement with Oman.
- The frequency of President Ershad’s visits to Muslim countries increased. In 1982, President Ershad visited Saudi Arabia three times. In 1987, he paid an official visit to the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), the first by a Bangladeshi head of state. The visit was seen as a significant move towards opening up new avenues for trade, culture, and economic cooperation. Such visits were aimed at increasing Bangladesh’s economic opportunity, opening door for Bangladeshi workers to migrate to the Middle East and thereby contributing to the inflow of remittances to the country. In 1984, as a result of such visits, Iraq agreed to recruit 11,000 Bangladeshi skilled workers.
- In multilateral forums, Bangladesh has maintained its Muslim identity. In 1986, at the sixteenth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) in Morocco, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister proposed a seven-point economic security program for Islamic countries. Bangladesh has also emphasized the inalienable rights of Palestinians.

It is pertinent to ask why rich Muslim nations were interested in funding and helping Bangladesh. A plausible reason behind Middle Eastern countries’ interest in promoting Islam in Bangladesh could be rooted in the Arab defeat during the six-day war in Israel, during which the US and other Western countries supported Israel. In response to the Western stance on Israel, Arab countries imposed an oil embargo on the US and Holland. The embargo was lifted after six months in March 1974, but a shock went through Western economies. According to US government statistics, world crude oil prices had tripled from the 1973 average to $12 a barrel." Khanha argues that “it is during this time that oil became the Arab’s geopolitical lever, making the gulf monarchies the world’s nouveau riche.” Arab countries have begun to exercise their influence, financing missionary programs in various Muslim countries in this vein. The Islamization of Bangladeshi society, politics, and culture should thus be read as a two-way process of a Bangladeshi shift in foreign policy and the geopolitical implications of Arab nations leveraging their influence in the world.

Another aspect of the military regimes’ foreign policy is their inclination towards the US alongside Arab countries. In the evaluation of Bangladesh’s foreign policy, Rahman argues that, “Bangladesh’s foreign policy … reflected the high priority on forging closer ties with Western countries

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74 Muntaz Ahmad, “Islam, State and Society,” 53-54.
and the Islamic world.”79 Two historic examples are relevant here. First, the Bangladeshi relationship with the Soviets had reached its nadir when, in 1983, Bangladesh expelled fourteen Soviet diplomats accused of involvement in espionage in Bangladesh; the Russian cultural center in Dhaka was shut down as well.80 The sentiment was greatly appreciated by the US, with the US providing some 15% of Bangladesh’s total bilateral development assistance aid in the 80s.81 When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the US was actively supporting the Taliban Mujahedeen. The US branded the Taliban’s war against the Soviets a “holy war,” a term that legitimized the participation of foreign Muslim nationals.82 During this period, the Bangladeshi regime was tolerant to home- grown militant Islamists, with the US orchestrating the war against the Soviet Union. Bangladesh neither discouraged nor encouraged Bangladeshis to travel to Afghanistan when, in 1984, volunteer corps were organized by radical Islamist groups to join the jihad. Riaz notes that:

Approximately 3,000 people were motivated to travel in several different branches to fight in Afghanistan and alongside with other volunteer Mujahedeen from all over the globe. Over the next four years, at least twenty-four of these Bangladeshi volunteers died, and ten became disabled. In 1988, a delegation of ten self-proclaimed Ulama (Islamic scholars) from Bangladesh visited Afghanistan. The returnees from the Afghan war maintained close contact with the Taliban and became jubilant when the Mujahedeen captured Kabul in 1992.83 These Afghan returnees with Taliban contacts later formed an extremist Islamist cell in Bangladesh.

In the 1990s, with the Cold War becoming history and the US becoming a global hegemonic power, against the backdrop of 9/11 as well as the US-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, Bangladeshi politics began to see a surge in militant Islamists with global and regional linkages.

CONCLUSION

I assert that the historical root of the 2012 failed military coup is Bangladesh’s foreign policy shift between 1975 and 1990, resulting from Bangladesh’s influence by Islamization. This process has been a critical factor in promoting the growth of Islamists in the country and increasing their support base in various strata of society, including the military. Without the support of the Middle East, it would not have been possible for the Bangladeshi government to promote Islamization. On the other hand, defeat in the Yom Kippur war influenced Middle Eastern countries to invest in Bangladesh and support the Islamization process. At the same time, Bangladesh’s economic dependence on the US resulted in inaction against the Bangladeshi Mujahedeen traveling to Afghanistan who later became pioneers in leading the Islamist movement, a key factor of which was Bangladesh’s foreign policy away from a secular India.

Interestingly, the failed coup can also be read as a reaction to Bangladesh’s recent foreign policy stance towards India. After the AL came to power in 2008, the Indian Congress party government and the AL came to close cooperation. The Indian government is generally concerned about Islamists, especially the BJI. Before a state visit to Bangladesh in 2011, Indian PM Manmohan Singh expressed India’s reservations about the BJI by stating, “We must reckon that at least 25% of the population of Bangladesh swears by the Jamaat e Islami and they are very anti-Indian, and they are in the clutches, many times, of the Pakistani intelligence unit ISI.”84 In the Islamists’ opinion, the arrest of the BJI leaders with whom the AL made an alliance in 1996 and the banning of the HTB are closely related to Indian influence on the Bangladeshi government. Before the coup, the banned HTB published a leaflet on its website calling to remove the AL government. The title of the leaflet is certainly representative: “O Army officers! Remove Hasina, the killer of your brothers, and establish the Khilafah85 to save yourselves and the Ummah86 from subjugation to the US and India.”87 These statements from the Indian premier and the HTB showcase the complexity of the secular-religious problem that Bangladesh has faced since its establishment. It is a national problem, with a national context that has become global. Islamists’ attempt in 2012 to topple a secular government should thus be seen as an ongoing conflict, of a global war between the secular and the non-secular – a war that has involved the US, India, the Middle East, and many more.

80 Ibid, 249.
82 Ali Riaz, Islamlist Militancy in Bangladesh, 82.
83 Ibid.
85 The Khalifah, or Caliphate, was a governing system used by Muslims in the early history of Islamic civilization.
86 The Ummah refers to the imagined global brotherhood of Muslims.