

# Islamism And Expediency In Bangladesh

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The general election in Bangladesh scheduled for 22 January 2007, already surrounded by bitter political dispute, has been thrown further into doubt by the declaration of a state of national emergency on 11 January. The country's president, Iajuddin Ahmed, prepares to address the nation after several weeks of mass protest and blockades by the government's opponents who seek to have the election postponed. The long-standing doubts over the fairness of the poll and the legitimacy of the institutions that will oversee it have thus exploded into a wider national crisis.

A new phase has opened in Bangladesh's stormy political trajectory since 2001, a period dominated by the polarisation between the ruling, centre-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition, centre-left Awami League (AWL). Behind the street barricades and the decisions of state, however, is a far larger story than the nature of the next government and the identity of the prime minister. For the underlying dynamics of Bangladeshi politics suggest the slow rise of Islamism towards political power.

Indeed, it is all too tempting to predict that - unless there is a rapid and unforeseen change - the outcome of the election (if indeed it takes place) will be less significant in statistical terms than as the culmination of the politics of expediency that has dominated the last six years.

In that case, the real losers will be the 140 million people of the country and with them, the ideals of secularism and socialism on which the country was established in 1971. The winner, almost regardless of the results, will be the burgeoning Islamist parties which are unremitting in their ideological drive to establish an Islamic state refounded on sharia law.

A new order in waiting The election victory of the BNP in 2001 was secured in partnership with the ardently fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Islami Oikka Jote (IOJ). Since then, these parties have been working to advance their ideological objectives; a task strengthened by popular antagonism to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the shadow of an increasingly Hindu fundamentalist India, and the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in Bangladesh itself.

However, the politics of expediency - a combination of violence, greed and opportunism - that taints the two major parties is arguably an equally important factor in the slow Islamisation of the country.

In December 2006, the Awami League announced that it had accepted the Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish (BKM), an Islamist party led by Shaikul Hadith Azizul Haq as one of its partners. As part of their joint memorandum of understanding, the AWL (led by Sheikh Hasina) has agreed to the BKM's four key demands in the event of an opposition victory:

\* "certified" alem (Islamic clerics) will have the right to issue fatwa (Islamic religious edicts)

- \* the parliament in Dhaka will impose a bar on enacting any law that goes against Quranic values
- \* the parliament can initiate recognition of the degrees awarded by Qaumi madrasa
- \* the parliament can implement a ban on any form of criticism of the Prophet Mohammed, including accepting that he is the last and the most supreme prophet.

The BKM has nominated five prospective candidates for government positions; of these, two are veterans of the Soviet-Afghan war and one supports a Taliban-style regime in Bangladesh. All have been high-ranking members of the banned extremist organisation Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami which has been waging a war to establish Islamic hukumat (rule) in Bangladesh.

One of these, Maulana Habibur Rahman, the principal of a madrasa, is standing in the constituency Sylhet-6 (Biyaniabazar province), where many British Bangladeshis originate from. His opponents accuse him of involvement in several bomb blasts in Sylhet, including the one in May 2004 where the British high commissioner to the country, Anwar Choudhury - himself a British Bangladeshi - was nearly killed.

All these demands have been on the agendas of every rightwing extremist party in the country for a very long time. Now, as part of its bid for power, the AWL - albeit in an election it is determined to prevent happening - has suddenly acquiesced to them. Even the JI, which had fought against the liberation of the country and is today implicated in the rise of Islamist militancy and violence, had not managed to achieve what the AWL has agreed to. The decision means in effect that the country is a few steps away from introducing a process whose ultimate outcome will be an Islamic State of Bangladesh.

The announcement of the pact was made on 24 December 2006, the same day Hasina was entertaining a group of Bengali Christians in her home. She made no mention of the pact, but reasserted the party's scripturally-based "commitment to secularism" argument and called on every citizen irrespective of their caste and creed to work to build a secular country. She also added - in what apparently was not a Christmas joke - that "the BNP-Jamaat alliance use religion as a tool of political gains, but the Awami League believes in secularism".

The agreement runs profoundly against the AWL's belief in religion-free politics, an ideology which Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujib had enshrined in Bangladesh's first constitution. It also breaks with the rest of the coalition partners' agreement to eliminate religious bigotry and communalism.

Three of the BKM's demands are a particular cause for worry.

The right to issue fatwa by aham who operate by Islamic law represents the creation of a parallel legal system to the existing, state one. Some years ago, the high court upheld a case brought by human-rights groups opposed to an earlier effort to establish this right. The groups argued that fatwa were biased against women, ethnic and religious minorities and secular organisations. An influential report by the legal aid organisation Ain O Salish Kendra in 1997 stated that "fatwas were issued sentencing women to whipping, stoning, social boycott etc. All these resulted in murder, suicide, physical assault, harassment (and) humiliation".

Islamist groups responded to the verdict by gathering under the banner of an "Islamic law implementation committee", which called for the judges who made the decision to be hanged; a cancellation of the verdict; and a ban on NGO activities. The committee was led by Shaikhul Hadith Azizul Haq, now leader of the BKM. In Dhaka, the committee attempted to block a rally by women's organisations supporting the anti-fatwa ruling; during the confrontation, a policeman was murdered inside a mosque.

Shaikhul Hadith Azizul Haq, then chairman of the Islami Oikka Jote, was arrested for the murder. Altogether ten people were killed and over 200 injured during the month-long protests. The party in power at that time, and which oversaw and initiated the prohibition of fatwa, was the AWL. The violence ended after the supreme court suspended the verdict for an indefinite period. The result was predictable: a report from the United States state department estimates that thirty-five fatwa were issued during 2005.

### **A minority under pressure**

The implementation of a ban on any form of criticism of Mohammed and of laws that contravene Quranic values is a way of using law to forbid and punish blasphemy. But there is particular aspect to such repressive efforts in Bangladesh, which are specifically aimed against the Ahmadiyya community: a sect of Islam whose members are persecuted in Bangladesh.

The Ahmadiyyas do not believe that Mohammed is the final messenger of Allah - a view that Islamist groups (including the Jamaat and the IOJ, organised with others under the banner of the Khatame Nabuwat Movement) find abhorrent. In line with a ruling in Pakistan, they demand the Ahmadiyyas be declared non-Muslim. The community has been attacked with relative impunity, and these attacks are on a rising trend since the 2001 election.

Amnesty International has repeatedly raised concerns about the safety of the Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh. The incidents it cites include the killing of an Ahmadi preacher, vandalism against their mosques, the illegal house arrest of Ahmadi villagers, street agitations against Ahmadis, and the waves of "hate speech" and public rallies calling for the declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslims.

The BNP government, seeking to preserve the relationship with its extremist partners, has done very little to protect the Ahmadiyyas during its tenure. In 2004, it even initiated a ban on all Ahmadi publications, though currently its implementation is suspended by the high court. By entering into the pact with the BKM, the AWL has reproduced a political anti-Ahmadiyya agenda, further stigmatising and threatening an already vulnerable community.

### **The new kings**

The BNP and the AWL are alike at the root of the politics of expediency, and share responsibility for its persistence in Bangladesh. The problem began soon after independence when (in 1975) Sheikh Mujib was assassinated and power seized by a military dictatorship. The military elite sought to consolidate its position and gain much-needed political legitimacy by turning to the Islamist groups - especially as a counterweight to the AWL's secular, socialist ideals.

General Zia ur-Rahman's BNP party removed secularism from the constitution and replaced it with "... absolute faith and trust in the almighty Allah". He also inserted Bismillah-ar-rahman-ar-rahim (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) into this foundational document.

Zia encouraged the return by stealth of what are euphemistically called "the anti-liberation forces", members of the JI, back into power. These were the very same people that Zia himself had fought against in the war of liberation a few years earlier. General Ershad also responded to mounting opposition and popular uprisings against his rule (1982-90) by amending the constitution to declare Islam the state religion.

Democracy returned in 1991 but unfortunately this did not stem the tide of political opportunism. Both parties have sought the support of the Islamists (in particular the Jamaat), either to help form a government or to topple a democratically elected one. Following the 2001 BNP-JI-IOJ coalition victory, the country witnessed a spate of systematic attacks on minority communities.

During the coalition's tenure, some commentators have characterised Bangladesh as a possible "next Afghanistan". Such fears were increased in August 2005, when 500 home-made bombs exploded across the country in a series of coordinated explosions. In order to protect the alliance, and

continue in government, the BNP prime minister Khaleda Zia, (General Zia's widow) accused the AWL of responsibility for this and the other atrocities taking place across the country.

Minority groups and other coalition partners are in uproar and feel abandoned by the AWL's decision to endorse Islamist demands. One coalition partner said the deal will "destroy the country's democratic and progressive spirit and will encourage militancy". The English-language Daily Star newspaper argued the deal has "laid the foundation of destruction of our constitution, our legal system and our way of life. In fact, it is a blueprint for a different Bangladesh, not the one we have now and not the one for which millions died".

In response, the AWL has been quick to resort to damage limitation. Its general secretary Abdul Jalil reiterated the party's "commitment to secularism". He has stated that this relationship with the BKM is crucially not a binding agreement but a "memorandum of agreement" and "an understanding based on an election strategy."

### **The cost of power-games**

This last comment goes to the heart of the problem. The AWL may believe that the agreement with the BKM is nothing but a clever if dangerous game designed to hoodwink the Islamist vote-bank, an attempt to split the numbers who overwhelmingly vote for the BNP-JI-IOJ coalition. The party possibly has no intention of actually fulfilling any of the BKM's demands. In short, this can be understood as an example of the marriage of expediency and crude unprincipled politics which characterises the establishment parties in Bangladesh.

But while the AWL tries to orchestrate extremist opinion, it is also taking for granted the minorities and the secularists, confident that it "owns" their votes. As one Dhaka-based commentator said, the tragedy for minorities and the left in Bangladesh is that they get the long pole from both ends: attacked, raped and looted by BNP thugs and Islamists for voting AWL, then abandoned by the AWL in its bid to gain power.

Over the years, the result of this kind of arrogance is that the Islamist agenda has trickled, drop by drop, into mainstream politics - to the extent that it is becoming hard to tell the difference between the mainstream parties and their extremist partners. The consequences of this kind of degradation in democratic politics can be fatal. A cartoon in a national newspaper is suggestive: it depicts Sheikh Hasina feeding milk and bananas to a snake (wearing a mosque-hat) coiled around her. The snake is no longer interested in the food.

The long-term damage done to the secular project over the years is evident in the fact that its self-declared champion is doing nothing to uphold it. As power is transferred - from Zia to Ershad to Khaleda to Hasina - the Islamist project gets stronger and stronger. The logic is that the next election - whenever it is held - will bring the Islamists to power, regardless of who becomes prime minister. The Islamists were once seen as being against Bangladesh itself, anti-national; then as

important power-brokers in the country's politics; today, they are on the point of being crowned kings.

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\* From 16 January 2007, Open Democracy, "countercurrents.org" :  
<http://countercurrents.org/bangla-hussain160107.htm>