

Believing in a secular Bangladesh

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The dictators are long gone, but have left behind their brand of populism

When the constitution of Bangladesh was drafted, the 34-member drafting committee looked into the great texts that emerged from the ideologies of the enlightenment era, namely the US's Bill of Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) for inspiration.

Instead of populism and communalism, sounder heads prevailed. In the preamble, they specifically resolved that Bangladesh should be a secular republic in accordance with the values of the national liberation struggle, guided by secular executives accountable to a secular legislative assembly.

Divinity or God did not get a mention, let alone an institutional role.

This wasn't done to downplay the role of religion in Bangladesh's social fabric. Since the wound from the War for Independence was fresh, the founders of the constitution knew too well about the devastating effects of communalism and how much blood it could spill in combination with the political power of the state.

Collusion between religion and state could profoundly harm the functioning of secularism, especially in the key aspects such as education, law, social progress, and healthcare.

This vision was strongly endorsed by the parliamentarians as well, many of whom were known for their religious convictions. Even the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was known for his devotion to the Islamic faith. But, whether the parliamentarians were Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or atheists, they, in unison, proclaimed to govern in secular terms; that is irrespective of a policy-maker's position on theology or philosophy, the business of governance shall be conducted on the basis of equality, rationality, merit, and scientific evidence rather than self-evident "truths" of divine relation.

When we look into Bangladesh's progress in issues such as women's empowerment, economics, and education for all, it is evident that the secular values of the constitution worked.

Unfortunately, that no longer seems to be the case.

We are now faced with a new phenomenon — the overwhelming exultation of ignorance in our political life and the erosion of rationalism in our policy-making.

This degradation and rise of ignorance have been marked by a brutal beginning. It started with the killing of the Father of our Nation along with our top secular leaders by a Western-backed military coup. The military dictators, for populist support, reintroduced Islamic parties into the political landscape, stipulated religious texts into the constitution, and finally proclaimed Islam as the state religion.

The military dictators have gone, but populism remains.

It has now become a common practice for our political leaders to profess their religious convictions and how they intend to uphold those values in policy-making for public acceptance. It doesn't stop there. In our current political marketplace, it is customary for our policy-makers to point the finger at opponents' devotion to faith to prove how their religious conviction is superior to that of others.

During the election seasons, it becomes a race to the bottom when both major parties start their election campaign from a place of worship. Worst of all, in the parliament is the frequent proclamation of the so-called "Constitution of Medina" as the governing principle of the nation — a clear violation of the spirit of our own constitution.

There are several problems with the stipulation of religious texts — and Islam as the state faith in the Constitution — as it puts a serious question mark on whether Bangladesh is a democracy. If Bangladesh is democratic, it cannot be Islamic, because democracy does not bestow special privilege to one religion over another.

Not to mention, that a state cannot be both Islamic and democratic because of the inherent differences between the two values that cannot be reconciled. Therefore, section 2A of the Constitution, and the religious texts in the constitution, proclaim Bangladesh is a state for the Muslim people, not a state for all citizens, not just in theory but also in practice.

What we see in Bangladesh today, bears witness. We imprison science teachers, writers, and bloggers, abandon progressive ideas like the human milk bank, deny women of equal inheritance rights, close our eyes when children are sexually abused in Madrasas, regularly witness the vandalism of temples and the homes of minorities and discrimination against those belonging to other sects of Islam itself, and so on and so forth.

The profoundly sad truth is that this degradation is happening under the watch of the current regime — the party that forged secularism in Bangladesh.

I'm a third-generation Awami League supporter and I believe that the Prime Minister also champions a secular Bangladesh just as Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did. This was evident in her promise to reinstate the 1972 Constitution in its original form after military dictator General Ershad decided to desecrate it with his amendments.

That promise is yet to be delivered.

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