An Enquiry into how Political Sufi-Regimes Evolve in Contemporary Bangladesh

Mamun Al Mostofa[*]

Abstract

Contrary to the commonly held notion that Sufis are generally apolitical, contemporary scholars on Sufism, in general, have reached a consensus that Sufism has always been tinged with political colour. However, this perspective, though dominant, seems to under-appreciate the nuances of Sufism and at the same time denies Sufis' capacity to remain non-partisan whenever they choose to be. Against this backdrop, this article attempts to investigate four Sufi-regimes that have been politically active in contemporary Bangladesh. Analysing their evolution, it explains the stage in their growth when such regimes are likely to remain non-partisan and when they are likely to shed their visibly apolitical stance, take noticeably more political positions and/or form political party. It argues that before taking on an explicitly political character, a typical Sufi-regime usually undergoes at least three identifiable phases – namely, recognition, expansion and stabilisation, and lastly discipline through organisation. According to the analytical model presented here, Sufis in the recognition and expansion phase are unlikely to join politics, while those with a disciplined group of followers and murids can participate in the political process with a minimum level of encouragement from their respective surroundings.

Key words: Sufi Orders, Political Sufis, Pir/Sufi Regime, Apolitical Spirituality, Explicit Politicisation.

Historically, Sufis[1] have been engaged in politics in every conceivable way.[2] And, therefore, contemporary scholars seem to denounce the idea of apolitical Sufism.[3]

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[*] Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

[1] This article uses the words 'Sufi' and 'Pir' interchangeably.

[2] See, among others, Isabelle Werenfels, 'Beyond Authoritarian Upgrading: The Re-emergence of Sufi Orders in Maghrebi Politics', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19, 3 (2014), p. 283; Barbara Degorge, 'Millennial Islam in Africa: Sufi Politics in the Sudan', *The European Legacy*, 5, 2 (2000), p. 205; Paul L Heck ed., *Sufism and Politics: The Power of Spirituality* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2007), pp. 1-2; Fait Muedini, 'Sufism and Anti-Colonial Violent Resistance Movements: The Qadiriyya and Sanussi Orders in Algeria and Libya', *Open Theology*, 1 (2015), pp. 134-45; Fait Muedini, 'The Promotion of Sufism in the Politics of Algeria and Morocco', *Islamic Africa*, 3 2 (2012), pp. 201-26.

[3] See Ismail R al-Faruqi and Lois Lamya al Faruqi, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers,1986), p. 304; Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam,* trans. Al-Ashari (New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers), p. 94; Muhammad Iqbal, quoted in Clinton Bennett, 'Introduction', Clinton Bennett and Sarwar Alam eds., *Sufism, Pluralism and Democracy* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2017), p. 5.

However, scholars' extreme views – such as Sufi orders "are never apolitical",[4] and "there is hardly the possibility of an apolitical saint"[5] – deny Sufis' the freedom to choose their "way of life", as Ansari puts it.[6] Such claims disallow Sufis' social agency alongside the capability to choose any position in the spectrum between 'seemingly apolitical' to 'noticeably political mode of being'. Again, while the following generalisations – such as Egyptian Sufis are "traditionally apolitical",[7] certain Moroccan Sufi-organisations propagate "apolitical spirituality" while others practice "militant mysticism",[8] Pakistani "pir has no sectarian preference and is never involved in political controversy *unless it is absolutely necessary* to protect his power and privilege"[emphasis added],[9] indicate that some scholars are willing to allow Sufis some agency, we still lack clear explanations about when Sufis maintain their apolitical persona and when they may possibly shun it. Furthermore, some researchers are inclined to present Sufis' political engagement as a contradiction. For instance, in relation to Bangladeshi Pirs, one scholar wrote, "Many Sufis may well conform to the general perception of Sufism as apolitical. *However,…*some Sufis are entering the political arena"[emphasis added].[10] As regards Chishti, Naqshbandi and Nimatullahi Sufi orders, another claimed, in a similar fashion, that they "abstain from what is generally or conventionally conceived as socio-political, *but* at the same time they do engage and maintain an interface with it"[emphasis added].[11]

Therefore, it could be argued that literature on Sufis' political engagement suffers both from extremism and confusion, a problem that stems possibly from a general reluctance to look sufficiently closely at how political Sufis emerge in their

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[4] Degorge, 'Millennial Islam in Africa', p. 205.

[5] Rosemary R Corbett, 'Conclusion: Thinking Otherwise', in Katherine Pratt Ewing and Rosemary R Corbett eds., *Modern Sufis and the State: The Politics of Islam in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 242.

[6] Sarah Ansari, '"A Way of Life Rather Than an Ideology": Sufism, *Pīr*s, and the Politics of Identity in Sindh', in Katherine Pratt Ewing and Rosemary R Corbett eds., *Modern Sufis and the State: The Politics of Islam in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 127-39.

[7] Kristin Deasy, 'The Sufis' Choice: Egypt's Political Wild Card', *World Affairs*, 175, 3 (2012), p. 45.

[8] Khalid Bekkaoui and Ricardo René Larémont, 'Moroccan Youth Go Sufi', *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 2, 1 (2011), p. 32.

[9] Saifur Rahman Sherani, '*Ulema* and *Pir* in the Politics of Pakistan', in Hastings Donnan and Pnina Werbner eds., *Economy & Culture in Pakistan: Migrants and Cities in a Muslim Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 224.

[10] Sarwar Alam, 'Encountering the Unholy: The Establishment of Political Parties by Sufi Masters in Modern Bangladesh', in Clinton Bennett and Charles M Ramsey eds., *South Asian Sufis: Devotion, Deviation, and Destiny* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 176.

[11] Milad Milani and Vassilis Adrahtas, 'Modern talking: Sufi socio-political discourse', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 4, 2 (2018), p. 193.

respective milieu. As a result, the extant literature largely fails to answer the following questions: do recognised Pirs always show their political face publicly? Is it possible for an individual Pir to remain visibly apolitical for some part of his career and then gradually emerge as political as his career advances? Or is it possible for a Sufi-regime[12] (or family) to emerge with apparent apolitical mode of being and then take a political turn in successive generation(s)? At which stage of their journeys Pir-regimes choose to remain seemingly apolitical and when are they likely to take noticeably political stand and engage in the political process? A closer look at politically engaged Pirs in contemporary Bangladesh may help us find answers to the questions raised above.

Therefore, this article places the following currently active political Bangladeshi Pirs– Sarsina, Maizbhandar, Atroshi and Charmonai Pirs – under the scanner. Since previously active prominent Pirs such as Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and Maulana Muhammad Ullah alias Hafezji Hujur currently have little impact, they are not discussed in this paper.[13]

Political Pir-regimes in Bangladesh

As indicated above, the following section analyses four currently active nationally known Pir-regimes in Bangladesh to better understand the phases through which they have travelled in the process of becoming overtly politicised. The comparative analysis of their evolution helps to explain when, after obtaining social recognition, a Pir is likely to leave aside his apparent non-partisan stance and take on an explicitly political colour. Short descriptions of contemporary political Pir-regimes are accordingly furnished below.

Sarsina Darbar

Sarsina darbar emerged during the first half of twentieth century in the remote village of Sarsina in south-western district Pirojpur (see Figure1) which was just within fifty-kilometre radius of Madaripur, the epicentre of the nineteenth-century Faraizi movement.[14] The founder of the Sarsina tradition Shah Muhammad Nesaruddin

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[12] Mart Bax's idea of religious regime has been borrowed here. We define a Sufi/Pir regime as. "a formalized and institutionalized constellation of human interdependencies of variable strength, which is legitimized by religious ideas and propagated by religious specialists". Please see, Mart Bax, 'Religious Regimes and State Formation: Toward a Research Perspective', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 60, 1 (1987), p. 2.

[13] For detailed discussion on the Pir-career of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani please see, Saiful Islam, *Shadhinata, Bhashani O Bharat* (Dhaka: Bartoman Shomoy, 2005); for Maulna Muhammad Ullah see, Muhammad AbdulHuq, *Hazrat Hafezji Hujur (r) Jivani* (Dhaka: Maktabatut Taqwa, 2020).

[14] Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, *History of the Faraidi Movement in Bengal, 1818-1906* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1965); Nurul H Choudhury, *Peasant Radicalism in Nineteenth*

Ahmed (1873-1952) was thus born at a time when the memories of this revivalist movement of Muslims in Bengal were still fresh in his birthplace.

Nesaruddin had a difficult childhood. At the age of fourteen he lost his father while his grandfather was still alive and hence was deprived of any inheritance.[15] As a student he travelled to several places – Madaripur, then Dhaka, then Kolkata and finally to Hooghly – for religious education. While studying, he received financial assistance from several local businessmen.[16] In 1895, while at Hooghly Madrasa, Nesaruddin accepted the spiritual discipleship of Furfura Pir Abu Bakar Siddique (1845-1939). Having received *ijajat* (permission to practice spirituality) from his Pir in 1901/1902, he along with his family members went to Mecca on pilgrimage. They stayed there for three years and returned to their native village when Bengal was partitioned (1905) and at the point when the All-India Muslim League was emerging.[17]

After his unceremonious homecoming, a couple of years passed uneventfully. He then succeeded in setting up a small *keratia* madrasa (where students are taught only how to read and recite Quran), which was constructed with betel nut tree and *golpata*. As late as 1918, it was converted into a new scheme madrasa that followed government-approved syllabi.[18] In the meantime, in 1911 his Pir Abu Bakar launched the Anjuman-e-Wayejen-e-Islam (association of preachers of Islam), a platform of ulema who travelled across Bengal offering both paid and unpaid public sermons. As a member of this network, Nesaruddin journeyed extensively through his neighbouring areas offering free sermons.[19] This is possibly how he earned his initial reputation. Over time, his madrasa grew both in terms of student size and infrastructure. Finally, in 1942, with the patronage of the then Chief Minister of Bengal AK Fazlul Huq, his madrasa – Sarsina Darussunnat Madrasa – obtained the

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Century Bengal: The Faraizi, Indigo and Pabna Movements (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2001).

[15] Hakir Muhammad Abdul Bari Khondkar, *Shah Sufi Nesaruddin Ahmed (Rh)-er Jīvanī* (Pirojpur: Sarsina Darussunnat Library, 6th ed., 2015), p. 13; also see, Muhammad Ismail Hossen, *Śatabdir Oitijyabahi Sarsina Darbar Sharif* (Pirojpur: Sarsina Darussunnat Library, 2020/2011), p. 16.

[16] Khondkar, *Shah Sufi Nesaruddin*, p. 15.

[17] Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan: All India Muslim League Documents: 1906-1947*, vol. 1 (Karachi: National Publishing House, 1969), pp. i-lxxiv.

[18] As part of the reform of madrasa education in 1915, the British government introduced new syllabi which a section of the ulema whole-heartedly accepted while those who opposed the initiative clung to the old syllabi. The madrasas under the opposing ulema were categorised as old scheme madrasa. For a detailed discussion, see Ali Riaz, *Faithful Education: Madrasahs in South Asia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

[19] Abu Fatema Muhammad Ishaque, *Furfurar Peer Hazrat Maulana Abu Bakar Siddiqui* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1980), p. 31.

necessary approval to award *kamil* qualifications (MA equivalent degree), in the same way as the Kolkata Alia Madrasa.[20] Huq's involvement in madrasa affairs indicates that Nesaruddin maintained good relations with mainstream politicians.

Fig. 1: Locations of prominent political darbars in Bangladesh's map (Source: Google Maps).

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[20] Khondkar, *Shah Sufi Nesaruddin*, p. 61.

Nesaruddin's teaching was also supplemented by the propagation of the *Nakshbandia tariqa* and writing Islamic books. At that time, most Islamic books were in Arabic, Persian or Urdu. Since there was severe dearth of Islamic texts in the Bangla vernacular, he not only authored as many as forty books to meet existing demand, but also donated their copyright to Sarsina madrasa.[21] As for his Pir-career, he made himself available to any murid or visitor on an almost daily basis, before and after mid-day (*zuhr*) prayers. After evening (*maghrib*) prayers, he used to lead collective *zikr* and give *tariqa* lessons.[22] It took him almost a decade to win a sufficiently sizable following to organise the first yearly gathering (*mahfil*) involving his murids – *Isāle Sauāb Mahfil* (1914). At that time, it was arranged once a year: on 14-16 *Agrahayan* according to the Bangla calendar.[23] Over the next two decades the number of his devotees increased to such an extent that from 1932 he started arranging second *Isāle Sauāb Mahfil* (27-29*Falgun*, Bangla year).

With *kamil* approval and the number of his murids growing exponentially, Nesaruddin instructed his followers to unite under an organisation – theAnjuman-e-al-Islah –headquartered in Sarsina. In 1944, this was renamed the Anjuman-e-al-Islah Hijbullah, popularly called Hijbullah. In the words of Nasiruddin,

> Those who accept only Islamic ideals and principles for the guidance of their personal, social and state affairs constitute Hijbullah – the party of Allah. On the other hand, those who are against it, constitute Hijbusśhaetin–the party of the evil. For the protection and advancement of Islam, it is obligatory [*wajib*] to join Hijbullah…. You all would admit that the importance of such a group has increased manifold these days. Therefore, I solicit all pious Muslims, be they are madrasa educated, English educated, student of madrasa as well as schools, wealthy people, merchants, servicemen, intellectuals and wage earners to join Hijbullah.[24]

Hijbullah's clear objective was to mould the individual, society and the state according to the ideals of Islam.[25]His Anjuman also had a student wing – Jamiat-e-Tulaba-e-Hijbullah – which in 1987 was renamed the Bangladesh Chatra Hijbullah.[26]

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[21] Ibid, p. 54.

[22] Ibid, pp. 49-50.

[23] The Bengali calendar was introduced during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akabar and is different from both Gregorian and *Hijri* calendars. It is used mostly in Bangladesh in parts of India (West Bengal and Assam).

[24] Muhammad Azizur Rahman ed., *Osiatnama O Malfuzat-e-Nesaria* (Pirojpur: Sarsina Darussunnat Library, 12th ed., 2016), p. 20.

[25] Khondkar, *Shah Sufi Nesaruddin*, p. 75.

[26] Ibid, p. 76.

Along with the growth in murids and admirers, the size of their contribution (*najar*) to the Pir's fund and his madrasa-centred establishments expanded. According to his last wishes (*wasiat*), after *falgun mahfil* had been successfully completed, the remaining fund – made up, again, from public subscriptions – was to pass into the hands of his two sons.[27] Similarly, any left-over of *Agrahayan mahfil* funds were to be spent on the maintenance of the madrasa and related establishments. As such, funding for his religio-political mission, too, came from murids' donation.[28] He also urged all his murids to continue their material and moral support for the darbar even after his death.[29]

That Nesaruddin's activism resulted in certain degree of social influence in the neighbouring villages is testified by several instances drawn from his biographies.[30] Over time, his influence grew to the extent that he started enforcing different aspects of the sharia among Muslims in the locality:

> At initial state he [Nesaruddin] used to use politely ask the interest-taking, non-praying as well as unveiled Muslims. If they were not corrected, he used to *ostracise* them from society. *Being excluded and being under pressure, people used to comply* [emphasis added].[31]

Nesaruddin's long association with the politically-conscious Pirs of Furfura, his background as a public speaker and also his own organisation Hijbullah made him a suitable candidate to become one of the co-organisers of All-India Ulema Conference that was held in Muhammad Ali Park in Kolkata in October 1945.[32] It was at that conference that the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, the pro-Muslim League organisation of ulema in British India, was formed.[33] Both Nesaruddin and his son Abu Zafar Muhammad Saleh (1915-90) then played an active role in the Sylhet referendum in 1947.[34] Furthermore, Nesaruddin organised an all-party ulema conference at Sarsina in 1951 that ultimately gave birth to the Nezam-e-Islam (NI) party in 1952.[35] He also

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[27] A copy has been obtained by the author from one of his grandsons.

[28] Rahman, *Osiatnama*, pp. 13, 19, 21.

[29] Hossen, *Śatabdir Oitijyabahi Sarsina*, p. 95.

[30] Khondkar, *Shah Sufi Nesaruddin*, p. 24.

[31] Ibid, p. 21.

[32] Amalendu De, *Islam in Modern India* (Calcutta: Maya Prakashan, 1982), p. 222.

[33] See, Sayyid A. S. Pirzada, *The Politics of Jamiat Ulama-i-Islam Pakistan 1971-1977* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Mohamed Nawab bin Mohamed Osman, 'The Ulema in Pakistani Politics', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2009, pp. 230-47.

[34] Hossen, *Śatabdir Oitijyabahi Sarsina*, p. 48.

[35] *Pariciti: Bangladesh Nezam-e-Islam Party* (Dhaka: Undated), p. 2.

played an active role in framing the 22-point basic principles that eventually helped to shape the constitution of Pakistan (1956).[36]

Following Nesaruddin's death, his son Shah Abu Zafar Muhammad Saleh (1915-1989) became the *gadiniśīn* and also the Amir (chief) of Hijbullah. Conflict with his brother Shah Muhammad Siddique over succession did not surface, possibly because, as indicated earlier, Nesaruddin had decided who would get what during his own lifetime. Saleh is now remembered for making Hijbullah stronger, maintaining good relations with almost all subsequent political regimes except that of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-75), his collaboration with the Pakistani army's atrocities against what were then East Pakistani civilians in 1971, and his efforts at modernising madrasa education in post-independence Bangladesh. As he is reported to have instructed his followers,

> If three Pir-brothers [who are murids of the same Pir] live in a particular area, you [should] open a branch of Jamiat-e-Hijbullah and regularly perform *zikr* and *talim*[lesson]. You would participate in weekly and monthly lessons. You should bring your sons, brothers, friends and relatives within the fold of this organisation and lead them towards the straight path.[37]

During his tenure, the number of murids grew so large in so many different places that it became unfeasible for him individually to instruct them on *tariqa*, let alone provide personal attention. Hence, he started instructing *tariqa*-trainers who used to give *tariqa* lessons across the country. The training of these instructors was usually three to four days' long. Any participation by lay murids was forbidden in those sessions.[38]

By 1950s, Sarsina had earned the reputation of being both a Sufi centre and a centre for Islamic learning. At that time, as many as 400 students from poor families used to receive free education, lodging and food.[39] Notably, few madrasas in East Pakistan could boast as many students. When in the mid-1960s Pakistan's military ruler Ayub Khan started to play the Islamic card, seemingly with a view to broadening his support base, he developed good relations with Sarsina darbar.[40] Ayub visited Sarsina

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[36] Hossen, *Śatabdir Oitijyabahi Sarsina*, p. 49; also see Leonard Binder, *Religion and Politics in Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 212.

[37] Hossen, *Śatabdir Oitijyabahi Sarsina*, p. 95.

[38] Muhammad Ismail Hossen, *Bir Mujahid Pir Shah Abu Zafar Muhammad Saleh (Rh)* (Pirojpur: Sarsina Darussunnat Library, 2016/2005), p. 31.

[39] Rhaman, *Osiatnama*, p. 12.

[40] Manzooruddin Ahmad, 'The Political Role of the 'Ulama' in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent', *Islamic Studies*, 6, 4 (1967), pp. 342, 353 (footnote no. 120).

several times, sought the blessing of the Pir,[41] and allocated 7.71 acres of government land to the darbar. However, Saleh's Pir-career suffered a setback due to its later association with the Pakistani military's atrocities in the locality,[42] leading to him spending twenty-three months behind bars.

In his old age, Saleh had a pioneering role in streamlining and modernising madrasa education. For him, religious clerics who offered expert opinion without considering the demand of time were 'ignorant'.[43] Accordingly, he came up with suggestions on how to achieve these goals:

> There should be different streams in madrasa. A group will emerge as *mufti* [expert in Islamic law], *fakih* [expert in Islamic jurisprudence], *mufassir* [expert in Quranic exegesis] and *muhaddis* [expert in Hadith] while another group will emerge as physicians, engineers, economists and sociologists.[44]

Following this approach, not only did he work relentlessly with the regimes of General Ziaur Rahman (1976-81) and General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1981-90) to reform madrasa education, but he proved to be one of the few Pirs who supported Zia in consolidating his regime.[45] As a result, he was awarded the Independence Award in 1980 in acknowledgement of his contribution to madrasa education. He was also one of the chief patrons of the association of madrasa teachers, the Jamiatul Muderresin Bangladesh.

Occasionally, Saleh also urged Muslims to observe *jihadi sunnah* (follow Prophet in matters of jihad).[46] Regarding the political role of his organisation Hijbullah, he emphasised that "Bangladesh Jamiat-e-Ulema and Jamiat-e-Hijbullah do not do partisan politics. We support neither any party nor any individual. Our support or opposition is for the sake of ideology".[47]

After Saleh, his son Muhammad Muhibbullah became the *gadiniśīn*. His mission was to spread the message of Islam through establishing qawmi madrasas[48] across the

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[41] 'Ayub Assures Govt's Loyalty To Islamic Principles', *Pakistan Observer*, 15 March 1963; also see Md Nazrul Islam and Md Saidul Islam, *Islam and Democracy in South Asia: The Case of Bangladesh* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 202.

[42] 'Ekti marmantod hatyakānda o sarsinar rākshash pir', *Purbodesh*, 19 February 1972.

[43] Hossen, *Bir Mujahid Pir*, p. 45.

[44] Ibid, p. 50.

[45] Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, 'Islam in Bangladesh Politics', in Hussin Mutalib and Taj ul-Islam Hashmi eds., *Islam, Muslims and the Modern State* (London: Macmillan Press, 1994), p. 112.

[46] Ibid, pp. 48-9.

[47] Ibid, pp. 109-10. This was an excerpt of his speech given to the *Majlish-e-Shura* of Jamiat-e-Ulema and Jamiat-e-Hijbullah on 12 March 1982.

[48] These are unregulated by government and run with donations from their well-wishers and sympathisers.

country, because, in his view, the *alia* madrasa system was no longer capable of producing practising ulema. As of 2022, more than 2000 such madrasas have been set up. Though Muhibbullah has made repeated statements that Hijbullah is a "non-political and religious organisation",[49] its past and present activism stands in contrast to this claim. On 3 June 1971, three months after the liberation war had started, the then secretary of Hijbullah, Azizur Rahman, issued a public statement urging the Pakistan government to offer military training to its loyal and pro-Islamic citizens to combat anti-Muslim forces.[50] Moreover, the Jamiat-e-Ulema and Hijbullah have been among the organisations taking the lead in campaigns against the Ahmadiya community, the noted author Taslima Nasreen in 1992-93, and in the 2020 Boycott France movement for its alleged anti-Muslim policies.[51]

Notably, at least two other grandsons of Nesaruddin have been active in the contemporary political arena. *Mejo* (junior) Pir of Sarsina Shah Muhammad Mustakim Billah Siddique (Muhibbullah's first cousin) have maintained good relations with the Sheikh Hasina regime.[52] In 2021 he was also planning to form a new political party, the Jamiat-e-Darussunnat Bangladesh.[53] *Sejo* (junior-most) Pir of Sarsina Shah Muhammad Arif Billah Siddique in contrast maintains close contact with the key opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).[54]

Maizbhandar Darbar

Maizbhandar *tariqa* is arguably Bangladesh's only indigenous Sufi order that emerged in Maizbhandar village in Chittagong in the late nineteenth century. Its founder Syed Ahmad Ullah (1826-1906) received his religious education in Chittagong and at the Kolkata Alia Madrasa. Being graduated from the madrasa in 1852, he was appointed as a *Qazi* of Jessore district (in 1853). After one year, he quit

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[49] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu9mOWIynF8, accessed 25 April 2021; also see https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3397411110367054, accessed 25 April 2021.

[50] 'Dash jan biśishta ālemer bibriti: deshpremikder samarik training pradān karun', *Dainik Pakistan*, 4 June 1971.

[51] Jugantor Desk, 'France mahanabi(sa)-er bangachitra pradarśan: bikshobh samābeś abyahata', *Daily Jugantor*, 6 November 2020.

[52] 'Naukai carte jot bendhe islami dalgulur torjor', *bdnews24.com*, 29 July 2017, available at https://bangla.bdnews24.com/politics/article1371377.bdnews, accessed 1 March 2021.

[53] Shah Muhammad Mustakim Billah Siddique interviewed at his residence on 3 March 2021; see, also, Salman Tareque Sakil and Chowdhury Akbor Hossain, 'Eight Islamist parties to merge', *Bangla Tribune*, 16 May 2019; Bangla Tribune Report, 'New Islamic coalition launched', *Bangla Tribune*, 15 September 2018.

[54] 'Ulema maśayekhder sange khaleda ziar baithak', *bangla.bdnews24.com*, 4 December 2010, available at https://bangla.bdnews24.com/politics/article453302.bdnews, accessed 26 April 2021.

his post and instead started teaching in a madrasa in Kolkata. In the meantime, he also accepted spiritual apprenticeship from a Pir, Sheikh Abu Shahmah. But, then, after the death of his father in 1858/1859 (*hizri* 1275), he returned to his village permanently.

Ahmad's first biography, first published (in 1967) long after his death, reports that during the initial two years following his return from Kolkata, he occasionally preached. For next decade or so, however, he abstained from preaching, maintained a low profile, and remained in relative seclusion. Once he had received *belāet* (experience of Allah), people apparently began to witness his miracle works, and his reputation spread like wildfire.[55]

His reputation even inspired a Hindu religious guru Monomohan Datta to visit Ahmad at Maizbhandar in 1903-4 (Bangla year 1310). On reaching the courtyard of Ahmad's residence, he noticed a large crowd that was divided into sub-groups, each consisting of three to four persons. Some were discussing religious texts, and others engaged in performing and enjoying music. In one corner, a mendicant was doing *zikr* sitting inside a mosquito net. After waiting for long hours, the guru along with his companions were permitted to meet with Ahmad face-to-face. All members of the entourage presented something to the Pir who was very old and had a dark complexion. His eyes were deep-set, and his hair had yet to turn grey.[56] Moreover,

> Fakir Sāheb [Ahmad] had miracle-making power. It is said that he performs his Friday congregational prayers in Mecca…. Many kings and emperors are obedient to him. His [miracle making] powers were manifested even in Bombay and Madras.[57]

No witness has so far testified that Ahmad performed his Friday congregational prayers in Mecca, nor there is any evidence that he ever had any connection with kings or emperors. But such accounts of his widely believed miracle-making capacity indicate that Ahmad had earned some reputation as a Pir during his own lifetime. Furthermore, according to available accounts, people belonging to other religious denominations also used to pay him visits and provide *najar*s (gifts). That Maizbhandar celebrations and practices could appeal to people from different religions was attested by an account by the renowned folk musician Romesh Shil

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[55] Muhammad Faiz Ullah Bhuiyan, *Hazrat Gausul Azam Shah Sufi Maulana Syed Ahmad Ullah (K) Maizbhandarir Jīvanī O Keramat* (Chittagong: Maizhandari Prakasani, 6th ed., 2012/1967), pp. 30-5.

[56] Monomohan Datta, *Lilarahasya* (Brahmonbaria: Anonda Ashrom, 1978 [1384 Bangla Year]), p. 133.

[57] Ibid, p. 134.

(1877-1967).[58] One of its distinctive features included being open to all religious denominations, and the unambiguous propagation of *tariqa* even among non-Muslims. The *tariqa* appealed to all *jātidharmanirbiśeshe*, i.e., it was applicable to all irrespective of caste, class, race, religion, and other backgrounds.[59]

Maizbhandar traditions offer people three broad pieces of advice: first, reserve a certain amount of time every day to assess one's detailed daily activities; second, avoid all unnecessary thinking and activities and shun reliance on others; and third, submit the ego to the Will of Allah and keep Him in constant contemplation.[60] It approves of music and the playing of instruments at times of celebration, and also of prostrating in honour of one's mother, father, teacher, Pir and a just king.[61]

Ahmad had fifty-one *khalifa*s in the southern districts of today's Bangladesh and three in what is now Myanmar. Of his Bangladeshi *khalifa*s, forty-two hailed from Chittagong district, five from neighbouring Noakhali and one each from Barisal, Comilla, Chandpur and Faridpur districts.[62] This geographical distribution of *khalifa*s suggests that, during Ahmad's lifetime, the *tariqa* had only gained popularity in Chittagong and its neighbouring districts. Ahmad appointed four *khalifa*s from among his close family members – his son Syed Foyzul Huq, his grandson Syed Delwar Hossain and two nephews, Syed Aminul Huq and Syed Gulamur Rahman. Of them, Syed Gulamur Rhamn (1865-1937) was regarded as Ahmad's principal *khalifa*.[63] Rahman's biographer Nabi listed as many as 148 *khalifa*s who were scattered across different districts of the country,[64] implying that it was under the leadership of Gulamur Rahman that the Maizbhandari Pir-regime expanded throughout Eastern Bengal.

From the late nineteenth century, the families of Ahmad and his nephews swelled hugely in size. Each of their sons and grandsons were similarly regarded as Pirs and *śāhjādā*s. The current Maizbhandar Pirs broadly belong to three different streams – Pirs of Ahmad Manzil (Palace of Ahmadullah), Rahman Manzil (Palace of Gulamur

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[58] Romesh Shil Sarkar, *Asek Mela* (Chittagong: 1992); Bhuiyan, *Hazrat Gausul Azam*, pp. 136-7.

[59] Hans Harder, *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh* (London: Routledge, 2011) p. 311.

[60] Syed Delwar Hossin Maizbhandari, *Manab Sabhyatā* (Chittagong: Gausia Ahmadia Manzil, 6th ed., 2012/1974), p. 9.

[61] Bhuiyan, *Hazrat Gausul Azam*, pp. 129, 131.

[62] Ibid, pp. 68-70.

[63] For details see, Shah Ahad Nabi Garibi Maizbhandari, *Syed Gulamur Rahman Baba Bhandari: Jīvanī O Kārāmat* (Chittagong: Maizbhandar Manzil, 2011), pp. 48-67.

[64] Ibid, pp. 241-52.

Rahman) and Huq Manzil (Palace of Ziaul Huq). In the twentieth century, three Pirs belonging these three Manzils earned much fame – Syed Delwar Hossain (1893-1982), Syed Shafiul Bashar (1919-2002) and Syed Ziaul Huq (1928-88). By the end of twentieth century, almost all male living successors of these lines were claiming the spiritual successorship of their forefathers. Even Shafiul Bashar's son and the Chairman of the Bangladesh Tariqat Federation (BTF) Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari, a full-time politician since late 1980s, admitted that he made murids and devoted at least one day a week to the interests of the *tariqa*.[65]

Although a certain level of competition has existed among the extended family members of the Maizbhandar Pirs,[66] presently they maintain a negotiated distance from each other. Due to internal competition among members of extended Maizbhandar family and external competition with other *tariqa*s and religious movements, the prominent Pirs of the last century – Syed Delwar Hossain and Syed Shafiul Bashar among others – took initiatives to institutionalise the Maizbhandar phenomena: compiling the sayings and teachings of Ahmad and Gulam Rahman, publishing hagiographies and devotional songs, and writing expositions about core Maizbhandar values. During this period of institutionalisation, the number of annual festivities in Maizbhandar increased. For instance, along with the *urs* of deceased Pirs (of course, there are so many of them), there were celebrations of Prophet's birthday, celebrations of different nights – *shab-e-barat*, *shab-e-qadar*, *shab-e-meraj* etc. – and even the birthday celebrations of Pirs and *śāhjādā*s (sons of a Pir) during their own lifetime.

In due course, Maizbhandar *tariqa* practitioners formed organisations for the spread of their versions of *tariqa*. The prominent among them included Anjuman-e-Tariqat-e-Islam, Anjuman-e-Muttabeyon-e-Gaus-e-Maizbhandari, Maizbhandari Foundation, Anjuman-e-Islah-e-Tariqat Bangladesh, Anjuman-e-Rahmania Moyeenia Maizbhandari and Ashek-e-Gausia Rahmania Moyeenia. In general, these have aimed at inculcating religious feelings, carrying out social work, serving humanity, keeping vigilance so that 'credulous' Muslims of the country were not deceived in the name of religion, preventing the misinterpretation of Islamic texts, and standing against injustices by forging a united front among Sufi-minded Muslims.

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[65] Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari in his interview at BTF Office in Dhaka on 30 December 2020.

[66] Samuel Peter Landell Mills, *An Anthropological Account of Islamic Holy Men in Bangladesh* (unpublished PhD dissertation, 1992, University of London), p. 292.
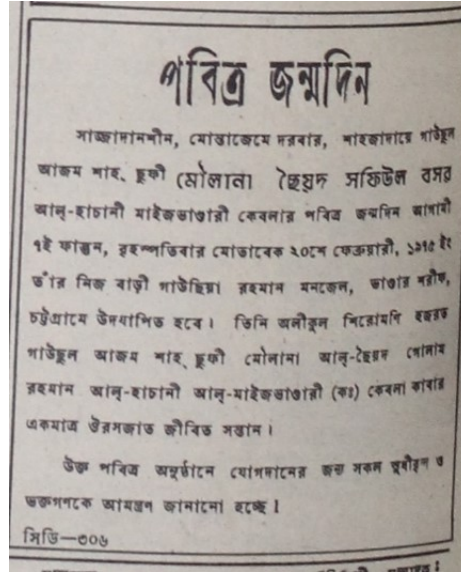
Fig. 2: Notice inviting all to the celebration of a Maizbhandariśāhjādā's birthday during his lifetime
(Source: *Daily Ittefaq,* 18 February 1975).

Meanwhile, to overcome the legitimacy crisis that his regime (1982-1990) was suffering, Ershad desperately searched for new sources of popular support.[67] By the late 1980s, he had managed to bring a number of Pir-regimes including those of Sarsina and Atroshi traditions within his fold. He also obtained some level of control of the madrasa teachers' association – the Jamiatul Muderresin – that was led by the Religious Affairs Minister of his cabinet, Maulana Abdul Mannan. With a view to taking advantage of apparently non-partisan shrine-centric Islamic forces, Ershad regime revealed its plan to take charge of the dargahs and *majar*s that had become the "hotspots of anti-Sharia activities" by enacting the Scheduled Dargah (Administration and Management) Bill (1990).[68] The existing stakeholders of shrines across the country recognised that the bill, if passed, would result in complete loss of their autonomy as *gadiniśīn*s on *majar*-related affairs. Undeniably, the bill had the potential to end their exclusive monopoly over the charity and donations that *majar*s received.

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[67] Muhammad A Hakim, 'The use of Islam as a political legitimization tool: The Bangladesh experience, 1972-1990', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 6, 2 (1998), pp. 98-117.

[68] Sangsad Pratibedak, 'Tafsilbhukta dargah (paricālanā o byabasthapanā) bill pass', *Azad*, 1 February 1990; also see Saṃsad Reporter, 'Dargah bill pass', *Banglar Bani*, 1 February 1990.

Amid the hue and cry that the bill created among *tariqa* circles, the Anjuman-e-Tariqat Bangladesh, that was being led by Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari at that time, mobilised stakeholders to forge a united movement against the legislation. Perceiving that the bill posed an existential threat to the *majar*-centred *tariqa* practitioners across the country, 874 dargah and *majar* committees formed a new platform for themselves – the Bangladesh Dargah Majar Federation (BDMF) – with Nazibul as its chairman. Their movement acquired additional momentum thanks to support from opposition political parties that were themselves agitating against Ershad. After the fall of Ershad in December 1990, the BDMF Chairman successfully contested the parliamentary elections on an Awami League (AL) ticket in 1991 and became an MP. A key reason why Nazibul was able to secure the AL nomination was the BDMF's evidently pro-secular stance. After all, one of its slogans had been *Islam-i satyikār dharma nirapeksha dīn* (Islam is the real secular religion) which was in line with the officially declared values of the AL.[69]

In 1995, Nazibul left the AL and joined the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), within whose hierarchy he secured the position of International Affairs Secretary. After ten years, Nazibul again parted ways with the BNP over the issue of forming an electoral alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which was accused of patronising militancy. The following month, he launched his own party – the BTF. Although the party was founded and led by one of the Maizbhandar *tariqa* practitioners, its relationship with other Maizbhandar Pirs has been far from straightforward. BTF chief claim that they believe in Sufi ideology and their party has brought all the *tariqas*, including the Maizbhandar order, on to a shared platform.[70] In reality, other politically ambitious members of Maizbhandar family, who are inevitably Pirs in their own right, have tried their luck in the political arena from time to time.[71]

Charmonai Darbar

The founder of Charmonai Pir-regime Maulana Syed Muahmmad Ishaq (1915-77) was born inBakarganj (now Barisal) district in Southern Bengal. He obtained Islamic education from Darul Ulum Deoband in India and received spiritual training in the *Chistia Saberiatariqa* from his Pir Muhammad Ibrahim.[72] He was also active in

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[69] Ibid, p. 26.

[70] Nazibul Bashar Maizbhanari interview.

[71] Bangla Tribune Report, 'Cattagrām-2 āsane manonayanpatra jamā dilen maizbhandarier syed saifuddin', *Bangla Tribune*, 27 November 2018, available at https://www.banglatribune.com/390963, accessed 13 April 2021.

[72] Muhammad Eusuf Ali Khan, *Charmonai'r Marhum Pir Syed Muhammad Ishaq Saheb Kebla (Rh)-er Sangkshipta Jīvanī* (Dhaka: Al Ishaq Prakāśanī, 2012), pp. 12-3.

Nezam-e-Islam party.[73]Ishaq's biographies indicate that despite huge effort on his part he earned little fame as Pir in his lifetime.[74] Near his residence, he founded a humble madrasa which is now one of the largest of its kind in the country: Charmonai Ahsanabad Rashidia Alia Madrasa. At the outset, it was a qawmi madrasa.[75] But when it failed to attract students, he changed its syllabi to make it an *alia* madrasa.[76] During Ishaq's advanced years, the Pir used to hold yearly *mahfil*s, which usually comprised a gathering of a few hundred people. When Ishaq died, barely a thousand people had gathered at his funeral prayers.[77] It seems that Ishaq devoted much of his energy to expanding the madrasa and propagating his faith both by giving public sermons and through initiating murids into his *tariqa*. He also wrote as many as twenty-seven books on Islamic rituals and theology in the Bangla language. Possibly because of his orientation with formal political organisation, he recognised the strength of associations, and so encouraged his murids to form the Muhammadia Ishaqia Zakerin Samiti and meet at least once a week in their respective localities.[78] But in this venture too, he had limited success: during his entire lifetime his murids only formed two such committees, one at Dayaganj in Dhaka and the other at Nurnagar in Khulna.[79] The Samiti was renamed as Bangladesh Mujahid Committee in 1982.

Ishaq, thus, left behind no empire. This meant that when it came to the position of his successor there was hardly any competition between his two sons – Syed Muhmmad Mubarak Karim and Syed Muhammad Fazlul Karim (1935-2006) – and so the younger, Fazlul, a religious cleric who had been trained in Lalbagh Alia Madrasa at Dhaka, became *gadiniśīn*. If Ishaq is regarded as the founder of Charmonai madrasa and darbar, then Fazlul was its expander and consolidator. He joined the Charmonai Madrasa as a teacher in the mid-1950s and from that poin the was an NI activist until he joined Maulana Muhammadullah's party Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan (BKA) in

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[73] Muhammad Zafar Imam ed., *Pir Saheb Charmonai er Jīvanī* (Dhaka: Mujahid Prakāśanī, 2013), p. 88.

[74] Muslim Ali Hawlader, village Pashurikathi of Charmonai Union, interviewed on 28 February 2021. He married at least one and half years before the death of Ishaq and in the year that Ishaq died Muslim's eldest daughter was born.

[75] These are managed and run by private persons or by faith-based organisations and modelled after the Deoband Madrasa.

[76] Alia madrasas follow government regulated syllabus and receives public funds. They are modelled after the Calcutta/Dhaka Alia Madrasa.

[77] Muslim Ali Hawlader's interview.

[78] *Ittefaq*, 2 March 1976.

[79] Islam, *Pir Saheb Charmonai*, pp. 68-69.

1981.[80] Indeed, Fazlul provided his family's Pir-regime with a strong foundation by pursuing two strategies: first, introducing organisational discipline by making what had been relatively passive murids into active mujahids, while at the same time using the existing murid-base to bring more people within the fold of the *tariqa*; and, second, establishing hundreds of qawmi madrasas throughout Bangladesh.

Fazlul would travel extensively in the country, deliver sermons and organise people. As a routine, he spent only three days a month at his Charmonai residence and reserved the remainder of his time for organisational and religious tours. By the mid-1980s, a good number of branches had been constituted in different locations. As of 2022, the Mujahid Committee is registered as a non-political organisation with the Ministry of Social Welfare, with Fazlul's son Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim (b. 1971) as its chief. All his murids are members of this Committee and are also individually charged with undertaking five specific tasks.[81]

Branches of the Committee, meanwhile, have been set up across the country. According to its constitution, the task of committee members is to develop a close and sincere relationship between murids, well-wishers, and all Muslims.[82] Most importantly, providing the financial strength of the darbar is also the murids' task. As a norm, they are required to contribute one-day's income a month as subscription to the Pir's fund, though unemployed murids need only contribute one-day's expenditure.[83]

Each of these grass-roots level committees consists of fifteen members, of whom five have the rank of 'commander' who are required to perform tasks as specified by Ishaq in his book *Jihad-e-Islam*.[84] In Ishaq's words, "Commanders are those who have made commitment to call people towards Allah",[85] and he spelled out their responsibilities as follows:

> You should keep an eye on each household in your locality. You should notice who does not perform five times prayers, who does not fast, who does and listen to music and who does not maintain veils. You should hand this list to the Imam of the committee. The Imam along with other members of the committee would visit the formers' houses and

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[80] Ibid, p. 89.

[81] *Mawaez-e-Karimiya* (Dhaka: Mujahid Prakāśanī, 2018), p. 100; also see, *Tarikar Pãc Oushadher Nītimālā* (Dhaka: Mujahid Prakāśanī, 10th ed., 2020).

[82] *Gaṭhantantra: Bangladesh Mujahid Committee* (Dhaka: Al Medina Plazza, 5th ed., 2008), p. 9.

[83] Shamsudduha Talukder, Secretary of QSB interviewed at his Charmonai office on 28 February 2021.

[84] *Gaṭhantantra*, p. 17, 20

[85] Syed Muhammad Ishaq, *Jihad-e-Islam* (Dhaka: Al-Ishaq Publications, 2006), p. 10.

solicit them to live according to Sharia. If this does not work, then they will circulate among people that such and such person do not comply with Sharia; please pray for them (if possible, you may also beat drums in the village markets to circulate such information). If this too fails, you should send their name along with their father's name [to us]. All the students and teachers would collectively perform *darud-e-naria* [special prayer for the actualisation of wishes] and pray for them. [Then] either Allah would give guidance, or they will not be able to live normal life; they must fall in some difficulty.[86]

A speech given by Fazlul on 27 February 1987 provides further insight into how these grass-roots level committees performed:

I have seen in Rangpur. They renamed a village as Mujahid Mahalya. *Mujahid*s there told me that not a single person can be found in the village who is not a *mujahid*. None of them is without regular daily prayers, none of them do music, none of them remains unveiled. Out of eleven hundred villagers, only eighteen do not say regular prayers every day. We have decided that they must start saying daily prayers. Otherwise, they will not be able to remain in the village. We shall oust them.[87]

As such, applying his father Ishaq's roadmap, Fazlul empowered his murids-cum-*mujahid*s by turning them into a community 'religious police' that exercised certain levels of coercion. As the excerpt above indicated, in some places these committees were hyperactive. In others, they could be more passive. Occasionally, Fazlul criticised such passivity and expressed his frustration that if all the *mujahid*s of the country worked seriously for the propagation of *tariqa*, it would not take more than a year for it to reach every corner of Bangladesh. He also observed that while the poor worked for the *tariqa* with integrity, rich *mujahid*s suffered from an excess of ego.[88]

As indicated earlier, with a view to expanding his support base Fazlul began a campaign in 1983 to establish qawmi madrasas. Their much-publicised objective was to keep children out of the reach of NGO-operated schools that had been offering non-formal education to children who could not access mainstream education. Accordingly, in 1989, Fazlul set up the *Quran Shikkha Board* (QSB) to bring all these madrasas into a common network. By 2020, it had affiliated some 3,000 madrasas, *maktab*s, Islami kindergartens and *hifz* (Quran memorising) centres, involving around 300,000 students and 2,500 teachers. Indeed, the large number of its murids coupled with these institutions has contributed hugely to the dominance of the Charmonai tradition within Bangladesh's twenty-first century religious space.

Based on the steady flow of charitable contributions from murids and admirers, the Charmonai Pirs managed to put in place a composite institutional model that has so

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[86] Ibid.

[87] *Mawaez-e-Karimiya*, p. 310.

[88] Ibid, p. 370.

far proved sustainable and produced regular graduates-cum-murids and murids-cum-*mujahid*s. Inevitably, there have been some challenges. During mid-1980s, for instance, Fazlul had to face invective and verbal assaults from other Pirs belonging to his own *tariqa*, including some who were *khalifa*s of his father. They alleged that the late Pir Ishaq had not given *ijajat* to Fazlul, an allegation that posed a threat to the latter's Pir-career.[89] But he overcame all such challenges by his continuous activism, on both a spiritual and an organisational level.

As mentioned above, Fazlul had been involved with the political activism of NI and BKA. After Hafezji's death, the BKA split. In these changed circumstances, Fazlul decided in 1987 to join hands with other Pirs and Islamist leaders to form the Islami Shashontantra Andolan (ISA). Within few years, some of its top leaders had either died or left the party, paving the way for the ISA to become synonymous with Charmonai Pir. When in 2006 Fazlul passed away, he left behind a consolidated Pir-regime, seven sons, one daughter and seventeen *khalifa*s. No sign of factionalism or split within the Charmonai regime has surfaced so far. That this Pir-regime continues to thrive is reflected in the participation of millions of Muslims in its annual *mahfil*s. As the Election Commission of Bangladesh has cancelled the registration of JI as a political party,[90] the ISA – renamed as Islami Andolon Bangaladesh (IAB) in 2008 – is currently considered one of the country's leading Islamist parties.

Atroshi Darbar

Founder of Atroshi darbar Maulana Hashmatullah was born in Sherpur district and then was brought up under the tutelage of Pir Khwaja Eunus Ali Enayetpuri in Sirajganj. Having completed his religious and spiritual training at his Pir's residence, Hashmatullah came to Atroshi (in 1946) accompanied by Muhsin Uddin Khan, a member of an emerging elite family in the village. Soon after his arrival, he married Muhsin's niece and started living in his in-laws' house.

From the perspective of the newcomer, things were strange at Atroshi. Not only was the area Hindu-dominated in terms of literacy, economy, and culture, but there was no mosque or madrasa in the neighbourhood. Hashmatuallah was shocked at the way that he had to observe his first Eid day in that village, where there was no celebration at all, not even the usual congregational prayer.[91]

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[89] *Mawaez-e-Karimiya*, pp. 307-308.

[90] Staff Correspondent, 'EC scraps Jamaat's registration: Issues gazette 5 years after HC declared the party unfit for polls', *The Daily Star*, 30 October 2018.

[91] Rafiqul Alam, 'Samasamaik biśwae janakalyaner janak hazrat baba shah sufi faridpuri', *Ittefaq*, 12 February 1998.

He started his religio-spiritual venture just as British rule in South Asia formally ended. Muhsin had a tiny, thatched house where he kept a cow-calf. When the new groom asked for it for the sake of his religious mission, Muhsin spontaneously donated it and so the propagation of the *tariqa* commenced from those humble beginnings.[92] As regards his initial activities, Hashmatullah later explained,

> Each week I arranged a *jalsā* [gathering]. I taught the participants about the basics of Islam and the *tariqa* as well. Having listened to the narrative of Allah's and His Prophet's love for human being people shed tears. They felt uplifted in each session. The households of *zaker*s [who do *zikr*] and *ashek*s [spirituality lovers] of Atroshi, Sarhesatroshi, Chouddaroshi, Arairoshi and Brahmandi villages donated a morsel of rice each…. Their collective subscription was enough to arrange for meals that followed each weekly *jalsā*. Gradually, the number of participants increased, spirituality seekers thronged to the area. Consequently, within one year I bought a house in the neighbouring village with only eight taka and named it *Zaker* Camp.[93]

Within the next few years, the thatched house was replaced by one with a corrugated iron sheet roof and was also renamed as Bishwa Zaker Manzil (global destination of the people who do *zikr*).[94] The *Manzil* imparted practical training of both the manifest and the hidden sharia that, Hashmatullah claimed, no educational institution did:

> My entire programme is based on Shariat. No anti-Shariat activity is permissible here…. Complete Shariat contains Shariat (exterior shariat), Tariqat [spiritual learning], Hakikat [essence of reality] and Marifat [attaining spiritual truth] and if one of these is out, Shariat loses its completeness…. If you like to realise the hidden mystery of the Creator you are to observe complete these four paths. And nobody can guide you towards the real path except the spiritual guide…. It is not possible to learn these from the educational institutions or printed books.[95]

This particular spiritual guide, however, was also concerned with the material well-being of people. In his own words,

> I give advice to solve mundane problems that make people suffer and, in doing so, teach them spirituality and guide them towards Allah. I give a drop of spiritual nectar in their tongue. In its attraction they keep coming to me in order to have more.[96]

Every day he made himself available in *hujrā* (chamber) to listen to the problems of *zaker*s and offer solutions: after breakfast till mid-day (*zuhr*) prayers; before and after

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[92] Hazrat Shah Sufi Faridpuri, *Bishwa Zaker Manziler Paricalanā Paddhati* (Faridpur: Bishwa Zaker Manzil, 2020/1995), p. 17.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid, p. 18.

[95] 'Where Lies Salvation?', *Bangladesh Observer*, 18 February 1988. It was the transcribed speech of Hashmatullah that was broadcast on 21 December 1986 on Radio Bangladesh.

[96] Faridpuri, *Bishwa Zaker Manziler*, p. 9.

asr (afternoon) prayers.[97]According to one of his admirers, people used to come to him the whole day along with their *nāliś* (complain of suffering); and they never were disappointed. When somebody visited him, he enquired about their health, financial condition, family affairs – everything. He also enquired about other *zaker*s of the visitor's locality and sent well wishes through messengers.[98] During the initial years of his mission, he used to visit neighbouring villages to deliver public sermons. After the death of his own Pir in 1952, he stopped these visits, and instead stationed himself within the confines of his residence so that people could meet him with greater convenience. Moreover, he strictly monitored the twice-daily meal that the darbar offered free of cost. Even the insolvent household of the neighbourhood used to depend on those meals.[99]

Due to Hashmatullah's personal attention to individual murids, and also his concern for their material and spiritual well-being, his reputation rocketed:

> From Zaker Camp to today's Bishwa Zaker Manzil – is the outcome of half a century's continuous physical labour. I have built this establishment with millions of my spiritual children's labour…. This impossible is made possible because of the efforts of *zaker*s. I did not inherit this huge property. On my arrival to Atroshi my Pir's blessing was my only capital. Later, Allah has bestowed me property worth millions of taka.[100]

But the saga of Hashmatullah would remain incomplete without mentioning the opposition that he faced from other Islamist elements. As he himself recognised,

> My long preaching life had never been smooth. There were hundreds of hurdles and oppositions. There was false propaganda against the *tariqa* and against me. Ulema and Pirs with gross understanding of Islam made united front, organised meetings, seminars and symposiums, and publicly gave *fatwa* that I am a *kafir*[non-believer], circulated leaflets and ran advertisements.[101]

According to one contemporary journalist, throughout 1960s, a section of leading clergymen and theologians used to label him as an infidel.[102]At the same time, Hashmatullah did enjoy some advantages as well. He was married into a Khan family that had been politically influential since the 1960s. His eldest son-in-law Adeluddin Hawlader was elected MP from the constituency several times. All his adversaries were banished when Ershad, as President of Bangladesh, started paying occasional

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[97] Muhammad Shahjahan, *Maha Mujadded Hazrat Khwaja Baba Faridpuri* (Faridpur: Bishwa Zake Manzil, 2019/2013), pp. 80-81.

[98] Ibid, p. 76.

[99] Muhammad Ali Hawlader in his interview.

[100] Faridpuri, *Bishwa Zaker Manziler*, pp. 131-32.

[101] Ibid, p. 19.

[102] S Kamaluddin, 'The General's Holy Man', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 April 1983, p. 16.

visits to Atroshi in the 1980s. Then political leaders as well as civil and military bureaucrats also became regular Atroshi-goers. Thanks to their patronage, the remote village turned into a thriving town with government schools, colleges, post office, telephone office, banking services and different kinds of mill factories. Some of this support, of course, was in clear violation of long-established government policies. Take what Muhammad Ali Hawlader, an elected member of Sadarpur Union Parishad during 1988-1992, recalled about a ditch-like place near the Atroshi darbar that needed to be landfilled. The local council agreed to finance the project with BDT 160 allocated per truck (200 cubic feet) of soil. The challenge was that soil needed to be brought from several kilometres away and so, at one stage, the project was deemed not to be 'not feasible' as far as the council was concerned. Following a request from Atroshi Pir, Ershad himself intervened, and the rate was raised to BDT 1750 per truck, more than ten times than the government-set rate.[103]

However, it would be misleading to state that Hashmatullah's empire expanded simply because of political, especially Ershad's, benefaction, as some scholars have suggested.[104] What is more likely is that he received attention from aspiring political forces precisely because he had already earned people's attention. The case of Muhammad Ilias, the Zaker Party's joint Secretary General and Hashmatullah's murid underlines this point. This former captain in the Bangladesh Army once visited Ajmer Sharif in India in early 1970s. To try out if that place was divinely blessed, he fixed a goal in his own mind in the name of the great soul who had been lying in Ajmer. He said to himself that if that place had been blessed, then his wishes would be fulfilled. And, to his astonishment, his desire was very quickly fulfilled. As a result, he became an admirer of Pirs and their darbars. In 1976, when he was posted in Jessore cantonment, a colleague invited him to visit Atroshi for the *urs*. He accepted the invitation. One night, they all were awakened at 3:00am for instruction. That very morning, he fell asleep, had a bad dream, and immediately woke up. The dream made him utterly sad. Four and half years later, the exact dream came true – he was sacked from the army. In the meantime, he made several attempts to verify whether the Pir was authentic. After the incident of 1981, he concluded that the man was a 'genuine saint' and became his murid.[105] Ilias' account is an indication that

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[103] Muhammad Ali Hawlader in his interview.

[104] Talukder Maniruzzaman, 'The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 1992, p. 211.

[105] Muhammad Ilias, Joint Secretary General of Zaker Party, interviewed at Zaker Party's Banani Office in Dhaka on 4 January 2021.

Atroshi Pir had been able to develop a sizable following in the military long before Ershad started paying him visits to encash political dividends.

While the 1980s were the heyday of Atroshi Pir, it was likely that he recognised that his darbar had reached its peak. His own Pir Enayetpuri's family had been influential in neighbouring Sirajganj district. Another famous disciple of Enayetpuri, Sultan Ahmad Chandrapuri, had his stronghold in Chandrapara, just a few kilometres from Atroshi. Besides, Maulana Saifuddin with the Mujaddedia Tariqat Mission in Mymensingh, Mukimuddin Ahmed with the Paradisepara Darbar in Tangail, and Badruddurza Haider with the Murshidpur Darbar Sharif in Sherpur, were also thriving at that time. Hence, realising that his darbar was less likely to grow further, he focused his energies on consolidating his already expanded enterprise by dividing his establishment into two parts: one strictly spiritual and the other socio-political. He entrusted his eldest son Mahfuzul Huq Mujaddedi with responsibility for giving guidance, propagating his *tariqa* from his khanqah, offering lessons to seekers of spirituality, and looking after the *zaker*s. The duty of the youngest son Mustafa Amir Foysal Mujaddedi was to organise meetings and demonstrations with *zaker*s, spread the *tariqa* at home and abroad, and carry out all the responsibilities of his trust, the Zaker Foundation.[106] The required institutional structure for spreading spirituality was already in place, but to organise meetings and demonstrations a new infrastructure needed to be developed. With that objective in mind, a 'non-political organisation' – the Bishwa Zaker Sangathan – was established in February 1987. Its branches were formed with devout murids across the country. However, there is ample evidence that this 'non-political organisation' possessed political ambition from its very inception. At least one year before formally declaring itself as a political entity – as early as February 1988 – in one of its advertorials it pre-emptively offered an answer to the following question: How would it be different to existing political parties and organisations that claimed that their mission was to establish Islamic rule?

> The reply to the question is: The organisation has no difference of opinion with anybody trying or eager to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh. [But] the Muslims who do not understand the real meaning of Islam and are devoid of Bateni [manifest] Shariah, Sunnat [traditions of Prophet], Tariquat and Marifat, will not be able to bring about Islamic rule.[107]

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[106] Faridpuri, *Bishwa Zaker Manziler*, p. 132.

[107] Abdul Kabir, 'Bangladesh Zaker Sangathan: An Organisation with Difference', *Bangladesh Observer*, 18 February 1988.

It justified this claim asserting that only its members knew the secret s*haria*. The Sangathan likewise expressed optimism that when it would "enter the political arena, its exceptional programmes will evoke widespread enthusiasm among people".[108]

Just after two years of its birth, the Sangathan was transformed into a full-fledged political party – the Zaker Party Bangladesh – with Mustafa Amir Foysal at its helm, though Hashmatullah himself remained the storehouse of all its power. Since detailed discussion of the party's promise and performance is beyond the scope of this article, it is sufficient here to mention that after Hashmatullah's death, the spiritual and political organs of the Atroshi darbar operated well together for about two decades. But by late 2010s there had developed tension between the two brothers with the result that the darbar split: Atroshi remains in the hands of Mahfuz while the younger brother is currently building another darbar in the birthplace of Hashmatullah, that is at Pakuria in Sherpur district.

Comparative Discussion: From the 'non-partisan' to the 'political'

Each of the above-discussed Pir-regimes emerged from distinct backgrounds, had their own journeys, and withstood diverse adversaries and struggles. Their competencies and, of course, limitations also varied. Despite their heterogeneity, however, they share some underlying patterns in terms of their movement towards manifest or visible politicisation. Indeed, four phases can be seen in their evolution: recognition, expansion and stabilisation, discipline through organisation, and, lastly, explicit politicisation.

Expansion and stabilisation

The cases explored in this articledemonstrate that a Pir's sphere of influence expands when he takes personalised care of his murids and followers, and through these satisfied customers they can reach out for new ones. To secure public attention, he also observes routinised collective rituals as spectacularly as possible. During this phase, a Pir remains relatively open, tends to show egalitarian approaches, and maintains non-partisanship as far as possible. Once such a Pir starts to earn a reputation, people visit him not only to become his murids, but also to secure *baraka*that, they believe, can resolve theirspiritual and worldly needs. To be available in times of need, all the founding Pirs discussed above, remained stationed mostly at their residence-cum-darbars in this early phase. While Clifford Geertz and Ernst

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[108]   Ibid.

Gellner stand face to face as regards the territorial nature of the Sufi sphere of influence, our case studies indicate that during this expansion phase they remain territorial and the followings of popular ones are territorially discontinuous and scattered.[109]

Understandably perhaps, expanding one's sphere of influence takes much effort and time. Some spiritual licenseesdo not start their Pir-career at all. On the other hand, a majority of those who do pursue a Pir-career have a solemn mission to reach as many people as possible. In their determined bid to convey the message of their mission, they also write profusely. Of the four cases here, three of the founding Pirs – except for Ahmad who belonged to the Maizbhandar tradition – authored books. Of them, Nesaruddin and Ishaq were the most prolific. Again, except for Ahmad, all these founding Pirs established madrasas adjacent to their darbars that produced a steady flow of murids from among subsequent generations.

Publicising the cults and miracle-making stories of the founding Pirs by their successive *gadiniśīn*s and descendants can positively contribute to the expansion of such regimes, as the cases of Sarsina, Maizbhandari and Charmonai indicate. These three regimes even published separate books on the miracle-making capability of their predecessors. Pir of Atroshi Hashmatullah, a first-generation Pir who attained huge attention during his lifetime, seemed to offset this limitation by making repeated reference to the feats of his Pir Enayetpuri: when anything extraordinary happened, he used to say, "This happened because of the blessing of your grandpa Pir".[110]

Another important strategy for the expansion of second-generation Pirs was the establishing of madrasas, especially belonging to the qawmi stream. Successive Pirs of Sarsina and Charmonai have so far established several thousand qawmimadrasas. They express little interest in establishing *alia* madrasas possibly because of strict government regulations, while the qawmi stream remains unregulated – anyone can establish anywhere any such institution that offers their own versions of Islam. The advantage of these madrasas is huge. For a start, their graduates are oriented with the *tariqa* and trained as murids. The mathematics is simple. As the number of madrasas increases, so the number of students grows. In turn, large numbers of students mean

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[109] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), p.8; Ernst Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 50.

[110] Shahjahan, *Moha Mujadded*, p. 145.

many murids. And if any of their graduates do not become murids, they at least turn out to be their sympathisers. In practice, students of their madrasas automatically produce murids over time because they volunteer in almost all collective rituals and celebrations. Besides, most students at these madrasas receive religious education free of cost, and for their scholarships to continue, they are required, among other things, to demonstrate their allegiance to the *tariqa* and perform its rituals. Most importantly, these madrasas invariably recruit pro-*tariqa* teachers. It should also be noted that Atroshi and Maizbhandar Pirs have established only a few madrasas, and their mode of expansion has been different, namely via darbars and different socio-religious organisations, for example Zaker Sangathans and Anjumans.

The Islamic religious space of Bangladesh has been mostly competitive, and rarely monopolistic. This competition is both internal, between Pirs of the same and/or different *tariqa*s, and external, with other Islamic forces that discourage, if not altogether reject, Pir-centred activities. Amid such competition, it has never been an easy task for a Pir to win the hearts of Muslims and be their centre of attention. Once won, managing them has posed the next challenge. Unless the zeal of their murids and admirers has been properly taken care of, the growth of a Pir-regime may suffer. When new recruits mostly come from the existing pool of followers' family ties, a Pir-regime is stabilised. During the expansion and stabilisation stage, the entire establishment of a Pir-regime may even take on a commercial colour.[111] All the Pir-regimes explored here, for instance, have strongly encouraged their murids and followers to read only prescribed books published from their houses. To quote Pir Fazlul,

> Do not read books written by sinners and non-ulema [who do not have formal religious training]. Therefore, it is mandatory to read books of *walis* of Allah. Brethren, Mujahid Prakāśanī has published translated books of other Pirs [as well].[112]

When new books are produced by their designated publishers, such Pirs have insisted that their followers buy and read those books. Besides, Charmonai and Sarsina developed their own networks of madrasas, with distinct syllabi, spread throughout the country, with their publishing houses also supplying the required textbooks for their madrasas as well.

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[111]   Peter Bertocci, 'Sufi Movement in Modern Bangladesh', *Oakland Journal*, 3 (2001), p. 60.
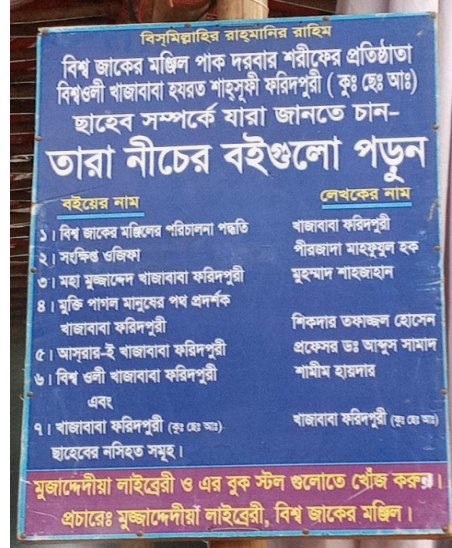[112]   *Mawaez-e-Karimiya*, p. 375.

Figure 3: List of prescribed books for the murids
and followers of AtroshiPir.

As we have seen, when Pir-regimes achieve a sizable following they also earn a corresponding level of reputation and influence in their respective localities. In electoral politics, where every vote matters, public-office seekers frequent shrines, dargahs and *majar*s with the hope of gaining implicit or explicit blessing and support. It is not unusual for such office-seekers to try to manipulate Pir-establishments through a range of means. Evidence suggests that in their expansion phases, the Sarsina and Atroshi Pirs maintained connections with local political forces. It is important to note that organising festivals and other ceremonies without much hassle requires cooperation from local political forces and groups, who can disrupt the occasion, or at least break the sanctity of the rituals involved. Again, occasionally, Pirs may bargain with potential political contenders for specific favours. Thus, maintaining political neutrality or disengagement can pose difficulties for a Pir during this stabilisation phase.

Discipline through organisation

As discussed elsewhere, people are usually attracted to Pirs because of their perceived charisma which is, by its nature, unstable and therefore transient.[113] A Pir-

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[113] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds., Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 246.

regime can be consolidated both for sake of "the ideal" and "strong material interests" of the Pir, his disciples, administrative staff and others if charisma is routinised.[114] When the followers of a Pir grow so numerous that it become difficult for the latter to offer regular personalised care on a one-to-one basis, he puts in place a hierarchical institution for teaching, learning and counselling. As personalised care of individual murids infrequently happens at this stage, Pirs feel the necessity to create organisational structures to manage, discipline and mobilise their murids and followers. Such organisations were founded not only by the four above-discussed Pirs and their *gadiniśīn*s, but also by other noted Bangladeshi Pirs such as Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah and Dewanbagh Pir Mahbub-e-Khuda. Our cases suggest that the consolidated and strengthened Pir-regimes are highly likely to make their political positions known publicly and have the potential to become explicitly political.

Explicit Politicisation

By the time that these Pir-regimes were stabilised and had formed their own organisations, the descendants of founding Pirs had either inherited or were about to inherit the *gadi* along with the goodwill and image of their predecessor(s). In the face appropriate stimuli, they have then joined politics. But whether the Pir in question joins an established party or forms his own political party depends on the overall reputation of existing political parties.

If the mainstream political parties carry with them serious allegations of corruption and nepotism, then by launching new political platforms Pirs, such as those explored here, can claim to stand for some cause. Their party may give the impression to their followers that, at the very least, they are registering their symbolic protest against 'evil' elements in the existing political process. For example, Pir Fazlul used to say that "trying to establish Islamic rule is compulsory, establishing is not".[115] On the other hand, joining an existing party could have meant that they were associated with a corrupt band of politicians. It goes without saying that Pirs' primary support base is motivated by religious rhetoric and symbols. Therefore – as political actors – Pirs themselves are also "constrained by personal histories and cultural forms",[116] and, for the same reason, are less likely to attract the median voters.[117]

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[114] Ibid.

[115] *Mawaez-e-Karimiya*, p. 503.

[116] Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13.

[117] Randall G Holcombe, *The Economic Foundations of Government* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 96.

Wider applicability

It may be helpful to see if the analytical model that has been derived from this selection of nationally prominent Pir-regimes in Bangladesh can explain the stages in the politicisation of other Pir-establishments. Take the following two examples. First, Pir Abdul Latif Chowdhury (1913-2008), popularly known as Fultali Pir, and his descendants have been active both in spiritual and political space for around three decades.[118] Mainly stationed in Zakiganj in Sylhet, Latif spent most of his life in madrasa teaching and *Chishtia tariqa* preaching. In the expansion phase, we find that he established madrasas along with other religious organisations, and authored exegesis of the Quran and other theological books. At an advanced stage of his life, he then set up an organisation – the Anjuman-e-al-Islah and its student front thatAnjuman-e-Talamiz-e-Islamia – that quickly assumed a political character. After Latif's death, his son Imad Uddin Chowdhury took charge of spiritual affairs while another son Husam Uddin Chowdhury oversaw the Anjuman – the political affairs. In the eighth parliamentary elections in 2001, the candidate of this party bagged 12,000 votes in the Zakiganj-Kanaighat constituency.[119] However, in the eleventh parliamentary elections of 2018, Fultali Pir and the Anjuman extended their support to the ruling Awami League; as the Pir himself reportedly said, "For the sake of the country and Islam, we want that grand alliance government [to come] to power again".[120]

Second, our model can similarly explain the politicisation of noted Pakistani political figure Amin ul-Hasanat (1922-60), also known as Pir of Manki Sharif, grandson of Pir Abdul Wahab – a Pir of *Qaderia tariqa*. Amin became *gadiniśīn* at the age of twelve when in 1934 his father Pir Abdul Rauf died.[121] With a view to channelling the combined energy of two million followers, Amin formed the Anjuman-us-Asfia (Association of the Pure-hearted People), and it was this organisation that helped him become a political stalwart in pre- and post-independent Pakistan.[122]

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[118] Ahmad Hasan Chowdhury, *Hazrat Allama Abdul Latif Chowdhury* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 2018); also see Sylhet Office, 'Sylhete fultalir pir saheber āhbāne biśal mahāśamābeśe ghoshaṇā: abilambe ahmad sharif ke fãsi nā dile sarkar badaler andolan śuru habe', *Inqilab*, 29 November 1992.

[119] Milad Joynul, 'Sylhete bhoter māṭhe fultali anusarīder prabhab', *Manobzamin*, 27 December 2018.

[120] Sylhet Bureau, 'Naukar pakshe samarthan dilen fultalir pir', *Jugantor,* 17 December 2018.

[121] 'Paraloke manki sharifer pir saheb', *Ittefaq*, 29 January 1960; 'Pir of Manki Sharif Dead', *Pakistan Observer*, 29 January 1960.

[122] Iftekhar Ahmad Yusufzai and Himayatullah Yaqubi, 'The *Pir* of Manki Sharif: His Role in the Pakistan Freedom Movement', *Pakistan Vision*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2017, pp. 31-46; also see, Israj
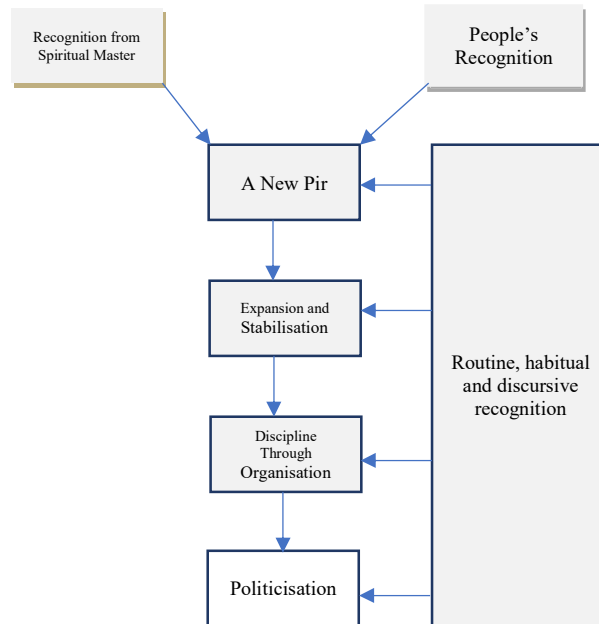
Figure 4: A simplified model of politicisation of Pir-regimes.

As earlier sections have highlighted, nationally renowned, explicitly politicised Pir-regimes all passed through four phases – recognition, expansion, organisation and politicisation. Initial recognition, as shown in Figure 4, is derived both from recognised spiritual masters and from lay Muslims, though it must be noted that in the subsequent stages of this proposed model, recognition can be characterised by spontaneity. Hence, it is both routinised and habitual on the one hand, and discursive on the other. Habitual recognition is manifested through the participation of murids and admirers in various rituals and celebrations, and likewise in the visits of newcomers and curious folks. Photographs, videos and other reports of Pir-centred rituals and celebrations that nowadays appear in print, electronic and social media,and in everyday conversation regarding them collectively offer discursive recognition to already known Pirs and their establishments.

Khan and Toheeda Begum, 'Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and *Pir* Amin-ul-Hasanat of Manki Sharif', *Abasyn Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (?), pp. 397-417; Erland Jansson, *India, Pakistan or Pakhtunistan?* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1981), p. 166, quoted in Ishtiaq Ahmed, 'The Spectre of Islamic Fundamentalism over Pakistan (1947-2007)', in Rajshree Jetly ed., *Pakistan in Regional and Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 157.

A cautionary note, however, applies. The model being proposed here may seem to indicate that all Pir-centred establishments follow a linear progression. A spiritual trainer may not feel like starting a Pir-career. For instance, Azhar Ali Anwar Shah, the son of the noted Pir-cum-politician Maulana Athar Ali, was a religious cleric and a non-practicing Pir. Again, any Pir-regime may remain at a certain phase for long or may even stumble. For instance, Ahsanullah's organisation remains non-partisan as of today and Bhashani's Khuda-e-Khedmatgar had become extinct by the end of twentieth century. Such examples refute any suggestion that Pir-regimes necessarily move in a set direction, nor that they remain static. Rather this does indicate the variability of Pir-regimes over time.

Conclusion

Analysing four nationally renowned political Pir-regimes in contemporary Bangladesh, this article has sought to identify the phases through which a typical Pir regime is likely to travel in its journey towards visible or overt politicisation. Hence, this paper suggests that after gaining social recognition a Pir first tries to reach out to the optimal number of people with his mission. When he achieves some success in expanding his murid-base, at a certain stage of its expansion it becomes difficult for the individual Pir to manage his murids and meet their expectations simply by way of personal contacts. Usually at this phase, the Pir forms some kind of hierarchical organisation to train, manage, discipline, and mobilise his followers. And it has been observed that those Pirs who are armed with organisational platforms get visibly political. Notably, none of these politically active Pirs had been visibly political from the beginning of their Pir career. Only after gaining a high degree of popularity, these Pir-regimes made their political faces known to all and formed their own political parties.

One of the implications of this article is that during the period of initial recognition and expansion Pirs remain focused on dealing with existential challenges, and hence are unlikely to engage in visibly political activities. At this stage, however, they may be forced to come to terms with local and even national political conditions. Being explicitly political is a feasible option for the members of those Pir families whose predecessors have earned and stock-piled the necessary religio-social capital that their successors can expend. Indeed, our cases suggest that – for political gain –later members of Pir families usually capitalise upon the hard-earned reputation of the first-generation Pirs involved.

Hence, this paper's four-phased model of the visible politicisation of Pirs offers a reliable, if not infallible, explanation of the stage in their evolution at which Pirs are likely, if not guaranteed, to join politics. This model, however, cannot predict precisely when a politically passive Pir may emerge from his apparent shell of political neutrality and become overtly partisan.