OPERATION AND PERFORMANCE OF SUFI-LED POLITICAL PARTIES IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Although Sufi-led political parties have been active in Bangladesh for almost four decades, they have received little scholarly attention. Therefore, this article discusses the historical context within which post-independence Sufi/Pir-centred political parties emerged, their interaction with other parties, and their electoral performance. It also touches upon some basic issues relating to Pir-cum political leaders: once a Pir becomes a politician, does his previous relationship with his murids (disciple) remain intact? This paper concludes that instead of posing any meaningful challenge to the political regimes, Pir-led parties have developed a tendency to maximise their political opportunities by reaching various kinds of agreements with dominant political parties.

Keywords: Islam, Sufism, Politics, Political parties, Political opportunity, Bangladesh.

Introduction

Sufis[1] have been active in formal political processes in Pakistan, Sudan, Lebanon, Egypt, Bangladesh and India (Degorge 2002; Nizar & Dekmejian, 1996; Ladjal & Bensaid, 2015). Bangladesh's Pir-led parties clearly belong to wider contemporary trends in different Muslim polities. When exploring why particular Bangladeshi Pirs have formed political parties in the late twentieth-century, Sarwar Alam (2012, 175-6) only identified exogenous factors – state's failure to find a set of stable principles, lack of rule of law and the emergence of religious extremism – totally ignoring the endogenous ones. Therefore, the existing literature hardly offer any clue regarding a set of basic questions, such as – once a Pir becomes a politician, does his previous relationship with his murids remain intact? Or does the nature of the Pir-muridi relationship change once the Pir has become a politician and his

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murid has turned into a political activist? Organisationally speaking, what becomes the top priority – is it spiritual training (purification of self) or is it politics?

Although Pirhood represents one of the oldest institutions in Bengal and Pirs are generally regarded as the key agents of Islamisation of the region, and four Pir-led parties have been active, such as – Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan (BKA), Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB), Zaker Party (ZP) and Bangladesh Tariqat Federation (BTF) [Zahid 2018], in Bangladesh, its Pir-led parties have received little scholarly attention as compared to other Islamic political actors (Kabir 2006; Islam 2015; Siddiqi 2018; Riaz 2008; Banu 1992; Zaman 2018; Raqib 2020; Khan 2018). Thus far only one study has been published on their political activism (Alam, 2012). Against this backdrop, drawing on newspaper archives, documents published by relevant parties, and interviews conducted with key individuals involved, this paper discusses the historical context within which post-independence Pir-centred political parties emerged, their interaction with other parties, and their electoral performance and respond to the questions raised above.

Historical Background

Though Bangladesh made secularism one of the fundamental principles of state policies banning religion-based political parties, it was unable to change the societal undercurrent of Islamic zeal, at least in the short term (Ahmad 2013, 605; Saleque 2014, 332; Rahman, 2004). To take one example, during Mujib regime a young poet Daud Haider (b. 1952) published a poem titled *Kālo suryer kālo jyochnār kālo banyā* on the *Daily Songbad* (24 February 1974). It generated much controversy because it allegedly contained derogatory comment about the Prophet of Islam. The poet responded by publicly apologising. But it bore no fruit: Haider was beaten by a religious mob, his ancestral home was burnt, and relatives were attacked. The police then imprisoned him "for his own protection" (Kennerly & others, 1985). In addition, Islamist forces demonstrated shows of strength in various parts of the country ("Kabitati kenra kariā", 1974; "Nabījī samparke āpattikar mantabyer prtibade pabnai pūrna hartal", 1974). Protest rallies demanding Haider's punishment persisted for months after its publication ("Bibhinna sthane bikkhobh o pratibād shabha", 1974). Apprehending the threat to the poet's life, the then government arranged for his exile to India. The Haider phenomenon, therefore, suggests that even though Islamists were officially banned, they were sufficiently strong and internally organised to pressurise the secular government to accede to a non-secular demand.

Bangladesh's first secular regime ended in August 1975 with a coup d'état (Ahmed 1983). In the following year, the military regime began the process of civilianising itself and issued the political parties regulation, which stipulated that before restarting their activities, prospective parties should obtain government approval ("Political Parties Regulation", 1976). Within one week of this declaration, Bangladesh's Islamist forces had hastily organised a convention to make their existence known. Hundreds of leaders and activists belonging to the previously defunct parties – e.g., Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), qawami madrasa-based party Nezam-e-Islam (NI) [Jalalabadi, 2004], Khelafat-e-Rabbani Party, Pakistan Democratic Party, Islamic Democratic Party, and Imarat Party – joined the convention and formed the Islamic Democratic League (IDL) [Majidi 2003, 75].

In April 1977, army chief Ziaur Rahman assumed the presidency, removed the provision of secularism from the constitution and lifted the ban on religion-based political parties with the objective of winning the support of Islamist forces. Islamists, on the other hand, supported him in the referendum because they thought that his defeat would be tantamount to people's support for the previous secular regime (Shaukat 1980, 32-3; "Nation goes to polls", 1978). Meanwhile, he began a state-sponsored Islamisation process that was later accelerated during the Ershad regime (Islam and Islam 2020, 172-86). In this process, Pirs started on a routine basis to place advertisements in mainstream newspapers to attract the attention of readers. This contrasted with earlier practices of mainstream Bangladeshi (and East Pakistani as well) newspapers. Since the late 1970s, Pirs grasped the opportunity of addressing negative stereotypes about their practices by authoring op-ed articles in mainstream newspapers on how to recognise an authentic Pir (H. S. Ahmed 2014; Shah 2015; Bikrompuri 2018).

In parallel, having established its relationship with Zia's regime IDL participated in the February 1979 parliamentary elections, contested in 265 seats, and won 20 seats with eight percent of votes cast (Maniruzzaman 1988, 225; Khan and Zafarullah 1979, 1030). Its performance in the debut elections was encouraging given the fact that, in the 1970 elections, these parties had fielded a combined total of 515 contestants, gained 17.85 percent vote, and won only one seat (Maniruzzaman 1988, 76). Of them, JI was the biggest contributor with ten percent of the votes (Kabir 2006, 65). However, months after the election, IDL experienced rifts because JI had revived itself as an independent political party (Shaukat 1980, 39-40). As such, the organisationally superior JI sought to forge an Islamic unity within which it would predominate (Azam 2004, 7-8). Therefore, it launched a platform named the Ittehadul Umma (IU) – meaning unity of Muslims (Azam

2006, 19-20). One of its objectives was to embolden JI's relationship with those Pirs who had traditionally been antagonistic towards its ideas and ideologies. As a result, one quarter of its presidium members were prominent Pirs (Azam 2004, 23-4). The organisers of IU made some futile attempts to convince two prominent Pirs – the chief of the Majlish-e-Dawatul Huq (a qawmi-madrasa centred ulema community) Maulana Muhammadullah alias Hafezji Hujur (1895-1987) and Sarsina Pir Abu Zafar Muhammad Saleh (1915-1990) to join (Azam 2004, 32; Kabir 2013, 120-159).

The foregoing discussion outlines Bangladeshi Islamists' show of strength in the early 1970s when religion-based politics was banned, their eagerness to enter the domain of party politics in the late 1970s, and their attempts to forge broader Islamist platforms in the 1980s. It was during the second decade of Bangladesh's birth that three out of four Pir-led parties emerged. Their individual stories will now be explored below.

Hafezji Hujur and BKA

BKA's founder Hafezji had earned much popularity long before he joined politics (Huq 2020, 120). In advanced age when he formed BKA, he made his murids pledge that – along with complying with Islamic rituals and regulations – they would engage in political activism (Huq 2020, 100). According to conventional wisdom, Hafezji remained politically passive for most of his life complying with the advice of his spiritual guide (Patwary 2014, 241). Evidence, however, suggests that he maintained political stance during Bangladesh's independence. Hafezji as the chief of the Dawatul Huq expressed solidarity with the policy of cracking down on the unarmed people of erstwhile East Pakistan ("Dasjan bishishta alemer", 1971). Due to his anti-liberation stance, Hafezji then remained passive during the Mujib regime (1972-5). And when Islamic conservatism re-surfaced (Lifschultz, 1979, 56), so did Hafezji. Ahead of Zia's 1977 referendum, he led a delegation of ulema who met Zia and assured him of their support if the government introduced an Islamisation programme (Farooq 1983, 11). However, when 'Maududi *fitna*'[2] began creeping into the newly formed but relatively popular IDL, Hafezji decided to challenge the anti-religious western-style politics (Huq 2020, 66; Farooq 1983, 11). Consequently, Hafezji entered the formal political process by contesting the presidential election of November 1981.

In his debut election Hafezji secured third position with 388,741 votes (1.79% of total votes cast), which was more votes than a couple of noted personalities,

namely the commander of Bangladesh Armed Forces during liberation war General MAG Osmani and another liberation war hero Major MA Jalil. Inspired by the election result, Hafezji's team was determined to keep up their momentum for change in politics through forming a new party in November 1981 ("Hafezji hujurer dal", 1981). Hafezji envisioned changing politics by changing people themselves, because, in his view, the only way of securing national emancipation was through self-correction, which, among other things, included staying away from Maududi's JI. Soon after the formation of BKA, Hafezji moved to the centre-stage of Bangladeshi Islamist politics through his attempts to unify heterogeneous Islamist elements ("Kona Prakar siddhanta", 1983). Even delegates from Middle Eastern countries started to pay him occasional visits hoping that he would be the next 'Khomenei' of Islamic revolution in Bangladesh (Farooq, 1983).

Months after the 1981 Presidential elections, army chief Hussain Muhammad Ershad seized power. While secular and progressive camps had rallied behind Mujib regime, Zia regime had largely depended on the support of conservatives and rightists. In contrast, failing to garner support from any organised social group, Ershad found himself facing an acute legitimacy crisis. In this context, Ershad identified a means of increasing support – the mammoth gatherings organised by prominent Pirs together with weekly congregational Friday prayers (Riaz, 2003). Four years after seizing power, when Ershad managed to get elected as President, the major political parties boycotted the election. Had he won the race unopposed, the entire process would have been devoid of legitimacy. In this situation, Hafezji came forward as the only other contender in the presidential race and, hence, endowed the election with a slight semblance of legitimacy. Ahead of the election, Hafezji regularly arranged meetings and rallies across the country.

In contrast, ahead of the same election, leaders and activists of major political parties – such as Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – faced elevated levels of repression. Their top leaders Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia along with their activists were arrested across the country ("Sheikh hasina o Khaleda", 1986). Law enforcing agencies sought to foil their rallies and demonstrations. As expected, Hafezji came second in the 1986 presidential elections securing 5.8 percent of total votes cast. The following May, Hafezji died. While different political parties expressed condolences and grief at the loss of the religious personality, President Ershad specially mentioned his contribution in the country's democratic consolidation ("Presidenter shok", 1987). Hafezji's death, however, triggered BKA's demise as an effective political party, as Table 1 suggests. Over recent decades, BKA itself has suffered from internal chaos due to

interpersonal conflicts among Hafezji's sons and grandsons over the leadership of the party (Zahid 2014).

Party	Election	Seats Contested	Seat Won	Number of Votes (Percentage)
BKA	1986	39	00	123,306 (0.43%)
	1988	13	00	105,910 (0.41%)
	1991	43	00	93,049 (0.27%)
	1996	46	00	18,397 (0.04%)
	2001	30	00	13,472 (0.02%)
	2008	33	00	16,944 (0.02%)
	2014	Did not contest	--	--
	2018	24	00	9,796 (0.0009%)

Table 1: Performance of BKA in parliamentary elections
(Source: Compiled from the data of Bangladesh Election Commission)

According to BKA's constitution, Hafezji was the supreme leader (Amir), who would be guided by the sharia, not by the whims of the organisation's lay members. He would enjoy lifelong tenure and his authority would remain unchallenged provided his activities did not clearly violate the sharia (*Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon*, 1987, 5). So, while BKA sought people's mandate and participated in elections, the spirit of its constitution, which categorically stated that "it is Allah who is the source of power, not the people", seemed to contradict the spirit of democracy.

BKA envisioned to prepare Muslims for jihad through *talim* (education) and *tarbiat* (practical training). Once these two processes had produced the necessary group of mujahids, the next step would be to purify the state system through jihad. To accomplish this mission, BKA's activists took a pledge to donate labour and resources and to pursue jihad under the Amir (*Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon*, 1987, 12). Activists were supposed to structure their daily activities in accordance with the party guidelines, which included: saying five times prayers in assembly with others, developing the habit of saying prayers at midnight, devoting at least ten minutes in *zikr* or Quran recitation or other rituals, and always remaining with the *zikr* of Allah. They were required to do physical exercise, reading and undertake charity every day, care for neighbours and comrades of the movement, and invite at least one person a day to join the movement. Likewise, they had to ensure that they earned an honest income. Before retiring to bed, they were expected to enquire what family members had done throughout the day and carry out a daily

self-appraisal of their own activities (*Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon*, 1987, 29). There were, of course, other weekly, monthly, and yearly ritual-lists, which mostly dealt with attaining BKA's political objectives.

Islami Andolan Bangladesh

It was founded by former NI activist and Pir of Charmonai Syed Fazlul Karim. When Hafezji established BKA, Karim joined the band. However, as a staunch advocate of the unity of Islamist forces, he was also active in the JI-led initiative IU. By the end of 1986, he himself took the initiative to forge a united platform with like-minded ulema (Azam 2006, 35-6).

With support from Maulana Abdur Rahim's Islami Oikyo Andolan, Azizul Huq's faction of BKA, Abdul Kader's Juba Shibir, Abdul Zabbar's the Anjuman-e-Ittehad Bangladesh and Karim's murids under the banner of the Bangladesh Mujahid Committee (BMC), and the followers of Pir of Noapara Khwaja Muhammad Syed Shah and Pir Abdul Ahad Madani the united political platform – Islami Shashontantra Andolan (ISA) [Movement for Islamic Constitution] – was launched on 3 March 1987 (Imam 2013,103-4). Guided by the principle of sovereignty of Allah and ideals of the rightly guided companions of the Prophet, ISA aimed at replacing the existing social order with an Islamic one (*Nitimala*, 2012, 7-9). After few months, Rahim died; Huq together with Kader launched another new party in 1989. Yet, after one year, Pir Madani died while the Pirs of Baitush Sharif and Noapara became inactive. Thereafter, ISA came to be known as a party associated with and led by Charmonai Pir (Imam 2013, 103-4).

ISA activists were expected to observe a thirteen points daily to-do list – that was remarkably similar to that of BKA activist, read Islamic books, do routine charity work, deliver at least one act of kindness a day, and lastly, before going to sleep, they were supposed to assess their daily activities and say other prayers (*Nitimala*, 2012, 32). Murids were also required to join ISA on the grounds that just as "Saying prayer is compulsory, so is doing Islamic politics" ("Namaj jeman faraj", 2019). However, after Karim's death, ISA was renamed (2008) and party affiliation for murids was made optional. In practice, BMC Amir and the leader of IAB was always the same person. Consequently, though BMC and IAB were run by two separate committees, it was extremely difficult at grassroots level to differentiate between an IAB activist and a Charmonai Pir murid. The party's primary target group till today remains ulema, Pirs and madrasa-centred communities (*Nitimala*, 2012, 8). IAB holds the view that as representatives of the Prophet, ulema and Pirs

alike must attain the necessary competencies to lead and Islamise society and state ("Rashtre alemder kartritya", 2021).

This party has regularly contested in national elections since its establishment. In 1991, it contested parliamentary elections as part of Islami Oikyo Jote that won only one seat. During 1992 to 1994, ISA was one of the leading organisations within Bangladesh's rightist camp that pressed for the introduction of the blasphemy law, trial of so-called atheists and heretics and for a ban on the operations of non-governmental organisations ("Arhai lakh masjid", 1992; "Call to punish", 1994). In the 1996 elections ISA did not achieve any mentionable electoral success. When AL government signed a peace treaty (1997) with insurgent groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts region, ISA launched a rigorous movement to press government to scrap the deal ("Parbatya Chattagram long", 1997). Again, in the context of numerous incidents of violence against women in the name of *fatwa*s produced by Islamic clerics (Shehabuddin, 1999), when Bangladeshi High Court declared the practice illegal, it protested this decision ("Fatwa samparkita high", 2001). In the elections of 2001, 2008 and 2018 elections none of ISA nominees won any seat. It boycotted the 2014 parliamentary elections along with other major parties. However, it fielded candidates in 298 constituencies (out of a total 300 constituencies) in 2018 parliamentary elections. For some political observers, the capacity to nominate candidates in almost all parliamentary seats is, in itself, a success given that the number of candidates of the largest parties – AL and BNP – were 262 and 258, respectively.

Party	Election	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Number of Votes (Percentage)
ISA/IAB	1991	59 (as part of an alliance)	1	269,434 (0.79%)
	1996	20	0	11,159 (0.03%)
	2001	3 (with BNP)	0	5,944 (0.01%)
	2008	167	0	658,254 (0.94%)
	2014	Did not Contest	--	--
	2018	298	0	1,255,373 (1.47%)

Table 2: Performance of IAB in parliamentary elections
(Source: Compiled from the data of Bangladesh Election Commission).

By 2018, it seemed that IAB was gaining in popularity. From 2008 to 2018, its vote almost doubled. However, these figures belie the reality on the ground. Ahead of these elections, the government unleashed an elevated level of repression towards

the leaders and activists of the main opposition BNP and its electoral allies. Both in urban and rural areas no posters, banners or leaflets of opposition parties were visible. Nominees of opposition parties were even barred from leaving their houses. On the other hand, IAB candidates faced no such hurdles (Bhattacharjee, 2020). Clearly, IAB enjoyed the blessing of the party in power.

Zaker Party

By the mid-1970s, Atroshi Pir Maulana Hashmatullah (d. 2001) enjoyed a huge reputation and the religious programmes associated with him were attracting millions of people. As we have already seen, in the 1986 presidential race, Hafezji stood as a contender-cum-saviour in the face of a comprehensive boycott of this election. In view of this, to reduce exclusive reliance on Hafezji in any future elections, Ershad needed alternative, arguably docile, opponent(s) against whom to contest for power. A few months after Hafezji's death, Atroshi Pir hastily formed the Zaker Sangathan (1987), which within two years had been transformed into a political party. Though the Sangathan was initially a non-political entity, its political intent was evident from the very start ("Bangladesh zaker sangathan", 1989).

Moreover, when ZP conducted its first ever rally in Dhaka, everything went smoothly with no intervention by law enforcing agencies. However, compared to other cases – for instance, when ISA held its first rally in Dhaka, the police forces' wielding clubs indiscriminately on participants ("Islami shashontantrik andolan", 1987) – it seemed quite unusual. Again, after the launching of ZP, Ershad did not stop visiting Atroshi ("Bishwa zaker manziler", 1990). In Bangladeshi political culture, it is rare that the head of the state attends any programme hosted by a political rival. Had the regime considered ZP to be a real contender for power, then it would have been more hostile to Atroshi Pir.

ZP's "sole objective is to propagate the comprehensive ideology of Prophet (sm)" (Zaker Party, 2023). Hence, the party conceived itself to be "the party of norm, party of *tariqat* – true *tariqat*". To understand the leader-cum-Pir's relationship with his murids-cum-activists', let us look at the document – a letter on ZP's official headed paper and signed by its chairman – provided below (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A copy of Zaker Party Chairman's letter to its leaders and activists to join
Atroshi Pir's annual urs in 2019.

In it ZP chairman officially asked party leaders and activists to join the religious
programme – the 2019 annual *urs* – that he would be hosting as *Pirjada* (son of the
Pir). The last instruction of the letter carries particular significance, maintaining
that "Those who do not comply, will not be considered leader or activist of the
party". Such statements clearly indicate that ZP did not differentiate between its
party activists and the darbar's murids. Moreover, its head office at Dhaka and
all other branches across the country are now treated as the darbars of Atroshi
Pir, reinforcing the impression that the spiritual and the political merge within ZP
framework. Like BKA and IAB, ZP also commands its leaders and activists to
refrain from taking what belongs to other(s), oppressing the weak, and destroying
or wasting property. They are to love every creation of Allah, prevent ethical
degeneration and seek to reduce so-called un-Islamic activities in wider society.
Through spiritual means the aim is to turn every soul towards Allah, and, thus,
unite the Muslims and establish peace (Islam) in the world (Mills, 1992).

ZP's only electoral success has been its capacity to field candidates in all 300
constituencies in the 1991 parliamentary elections. Though party organisers now
claim that it has thirty million supporters, it is yet to gain any seat in the parliament.[3]

Ahead of the 2001 elections, it formed a strategic partnership with BNP-JI alliance and so joined a united movement launched against the then ruling AL ("Bishwa zaker manziler", 2000). However, it broke away with BNP in 2005 when the government was reluctant to take steps against JI for its alleged patronisation of militancy in Bangladesh. Since 2005, ZP politics have been limited by its unwavering support for AL's programmes (*Banglanews24.com*, 2018; "Zaker party upazila", 2019; "Awami leagueke samarthan", 2018).

Party	Election	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Number of Votes (Percentage)
Zaker Party	1991	251	0	417,737 (1.22%)
	1996	241	0	167,246 (0.40%)
	2001	4	0	1,181 (0.01%)
	2008	37	0	134,933 (0.19%)
	2014	Did not Contest	--	--
	2018	90	0	109,440 (1.47%)

Table 3: Performance of ZP in parliamentary elections
(Source: Compiled from the data of Bangladesh Election Commission)

Bangladesh Tariqat Federation

Its emergence was intricately linked to the rise of Jamaat-patronised Islamic militancy (Fair & Hamza 2017, 626; Kumar 2018). In connection with controversy within BNP-Jamaat alliance government over the Jamaat's involvement in militant attacks on cinema halls, cultural programmes, secular scholars, political activists and parties, courts of law and even on shrines, churches, mosques ("New political party", 2005; Dasgupta 2005; Dasgupta S., 2005), BNP's Foreign Affairs Secretary Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari, a *Pirjada* belonging to the Maizbhandari tradition and chairman of the Bangladesh Dargah Majar Federation, resigned. Said to be inspired by religious values, spirituality, and the continuing spirit of the 1971 liberation war, he launched BTF with a view to "counter pro-Maududi Jamaati perpetrators" ("Jammati ghatakder pratirodher", 2005). BTF Chairman explained that the spiritual practitioners are not supposed to launch any political party. But they have been compelled to do so to maintain their existence in the face of repeated militant attacks on their dargahs and shrines in the name of Islam ("New political party", 2005).

BTF aims at establishing national unity, protecting the country's sovereignty, building a welfare state based on a non-communal spirit, and making both society and the state free of militancy. It also advocated spreading Sufi spirituality. Since its birth, BTF has accused the Jamaat of abusing and misinterpreting Islam (Ghoshonapatra, 2018, 4-6). While Islamists remain generally stigmatised for their anti-liberation role in the 1970s, BTF sought to establish its pro-liberation war credentials. Its highest policy-making body – the Presidium – comprises exclusively well-known Pirs (Miazi, 2020). As regards their relationship with murids, its Chairman did not fail to add that he personally devoted one day a week for his murids (Maizbhandari, 2020).

In its debut parliamentary elections in 2008, BTF Chairman managed to secure only 19,905 votes from his home constituency in Chittagong. The party attained its highest success in the controversial 2014 elections (Riaz, 2021) when it entered an alliance with the then ruling AL and won two seats. In the most recent parliamentary elections (2018), BTF Chairman was re-elected from his constituency, again as a candidate of AL-led alliance (Hasan, 2018).

Party	Election	Seats Contested	Seat Won	Number of Votes (Percentage)
BTF	2008	31	00	19,905 (0.03%)
	2014	03	02	177,449 (10.4%)
	2018	01	01	429,955 (0.51%)

Table 4: Performance of BTF in national elections
(Source: Compiled from the data of Bangladesh Election Commission).

From its outset, BTF has proved consistent in its support for AL-led policies and programmes. The party supported AL government in its handling of the Hefazat-e-Islam-led massive country-wide agitation pressing for its 13-points demands which included, among other things, re-Islamising the constitution, passing a blasphemy law, and the trial of so-called atheists and heretics ("Maulana shafike birtarke", 2020).

Comparative discussion

Out of four Pir-centred political parties, three – BKA, IAB and ZP – were formed during 1980s when the ruling regime was deliberately patronising Islamist forces to secure political gains. The timing of their formation, thus, corroborates Emajuddin Ahmed's generalisation that when prospective political groups are

offered even limited opportunities, they form political parties (1983, 1116). But the Pirs involved also had their own calculations. Hafezji, for instance, decided to mobilise qawmi based community after having observed that Jamaat-dominated IDL had bagged almost one sixth of the total votes and won more than six percent of parliamentary seats. The qawmi-community, which had been the mainstay of the NI during the Pakistan period (Jalalabadi, 2004), had taken a concrete political shape once again in post-independent Bangladesh under Hafezji's leadership.

On the other hand, ZP's emergence is noteworthy because through it a shrine-centred Pir entered the Bangladeshi political arena for the first time in Bangladesh's history. And when the relatively unorganised followers of dargah-based Pirs had been facing an existential crisis in the face of attacks on them by religious opponents, sections of Bangladeshi Sufis, like their counterparts in Algeria and Tunisia (Werenfels, 2014), hoped to negotiate their security with the power elites. However, the creation of BTF did not mean that these threats ended (BBC Bangla, 2016).

Electorally, these Pir-parties have rarely posed challenge to existing ruling regimes. However, one should bear in mind that even in relatively open and accessible political systems, such as those that operate in Western democracies, the electoral performance of new political parties can be uninspiring (Krouwel & Lucardie, 2008). Yet, Pir-parties have shown relative success in their capacity to either be coopeted in power or be engaged in cooperative electoral competition with power elites. Ershad regime could cajole Hafezji and Pir of Atroshi primarily for its own advantage. Likewise, in the 2018 parliamentary elections, the Charmonai Pir's party received state patronage to endow the election with a semblance of competitiveness. In the main, these Pir-centred parties are engaged in symbiotic relationship with political regimes and/or major political parties who have higher chances of winning state power. In return, Pirs receive better access to state's propaganda machinery and patronisation in various forms. For instance, under Ershad, Atroshi Pir was frequently interviewed by Bangladesh's state-owned radio on matters relating to Islam. The Pir, however, never visited the radio office himself. Instead, the radio station went to Atroshi. Besides, it is widely believed that all the imams of Bangladesh's national mosques who were appointed during the AL's time in power hailed from strong Sufi backgrounds, something that was made possible thanks to BTF's influence over the government. Such developments clearly corroborate Benedict Anderson's assertation that religious actors often use politics for religious ends (1977, 22).

Given existing voting patterns in Bangladesh, no Pir-led party can realistically expect to win more than couple of seats in parliamentary elections. And yet being an MP brings in huge resources. For instance, along with a handsome monthly remuneration they also receive allowances and furnished housing facilities and healthcare benefits. They also receive around one million taka to cover transport cost and the costs of maintaining their constituency office.[4] They have access to lucrative plots and flats in the capital city at a subsidised price (Kalerkantho, 2019). Each MP is allotted a discretionary fund of forty million BDT per year (Hossen, 2018). Besides, most state funds – such as the Food for Work project, relief funds and social safety nets – are disbursed at the local level on written advice from local MPs. The MP or his/her nominee is the chair of all the educational institutions within his/her electoral constituency. There is evidence to suggest that MPs can also determine who controls which shrine. For instance, there was an altercation in a parliamentary standing committee between two sitting parliament members – BTF Chairman and Aslamul Huq of the ruling party – that centred on the control of the affairs of Shah Ali's majar, one of the busiest shrines in Dhaka city (Banglanews24.com, 2015). Such incidents underline that political control over majar affairs is not just a hearsay.

None of the politically active Pirs gave up their spiritual practices upon launching their party. There does not seem to have been any indication that they placed their spiritual mission second in relation to their politics; instead, evidence suggests that they regarded their engagement in politics to be a religious 'obligation'. Even when they had engaged in formal political processes, these Pirs continued to command their murids to strictly observe the rituals of religion as well as *tariqa*. Each of them urged their followers to remain always morally upright. It would, therefore, seem that even after Pirs turn into politicians, they strive to prioritise existing Pir-muridi relationships over their political agenda. Possibly, this is linked to the fact that they only become politically relevant thanks to their prior religious reputation.

The mainstay of BKA and IAB are qawmi madrasa teachers and students. Until today, their chosen strategy has been to expand support-base through establishing madrasas and producing graduates to carry their mission forward: "Each madrasa is an autonomous sphere which is operated mainly under the authority of a principal. And when several principals group together, they become a [considerable] force" (Parvez, 2018). This is why control over qawmi madrasas has proved so crucial in their politics. Even prominent religious personalities – for instance, Hafezji – is said occasionally to have engaged in violence to maintain control over these important centres religious learning ("Madrasar dakhal laia", 1986). Of late, power

elites have been reported as interfering in this possession of qawmi madrasas ("Muahmmadpur madrasa mamunul", 2021).

Most leaders and activists of BKA and IAB have been madrasa educators whose primary concern has been to train future ulema to guide the Muslims as regards righteous and wrongful deeds, to interpret and propagate holy texts, and above all to be the embodiment of what is popularly regarded as a 'true' Muslim. Therefore, they laid stress on the strict observance of rituals and the preservation of traditional Islamic institutions. Not only Hafezji and Charmonai Pir, but a sizeable number of other spiritual masters, for instance the Pirs of Sarsina, Noapara and Fultali, also belonged to this group. This collection of qawmi-madrasa oriented Pirs are usually vocal in their demand for enacting the blasphemy law, anti-Ahmadiya agitation, punishment of so-called atheists and heretics, and, above all, the strict enforcement of the Islamic code.

On the other hand, there are the dargah-centred Pirs and their parties, such as ZP and BTF. Though they also occasionally establish madrasas near their shrines, their spiritual mission takes place through their darbars. Hence, when these Pirs develop sizable number of murids in a new area, they set up a darbar in that neighbourhood. These then become the places where murids perform their collective rituals, *zikr* and weekly or monthly religious training sessions. Hence, their structures cater also for professionals who are unlikely to go near a madrasa. Darbar- and dargah-centric Pirs appear to be more open, flexible and relatively less strict when it comes to the matter of ritual observances (Huq 1987, 28). Among the many darbars to be found in present-day Bangladesh, the Pirs of Maizbhandar, Atroshi, Dewanbag, Kutubbag and Chandrapara belong to this grouping. But since these Pirs rarely possess the same labour-force reservoir upon which to draw when compared with their madrasa-centred equivalents, they are less prone to engage in agitational politics. These functional differences mean that qawmi-madrasa-based Pirs and shrine-based Pirs can often be at loggerheads. For example, supporters of Charmonai and Dewanbaghi – emerged as a prominent Pir in the 1990s – have engaged in six large scale violent conflicts since 1999.

Over recent decades BKA has been gradually heading towards oblivion while IAB and BTF have both steadily gained ground, as indicated in Figure 2, which highlights that since the middle of first decade of this century their votes have doubled every five years. Whether this is caused by internal factors and/or by the policies of patronages by AL-led government, however, still needs further research.
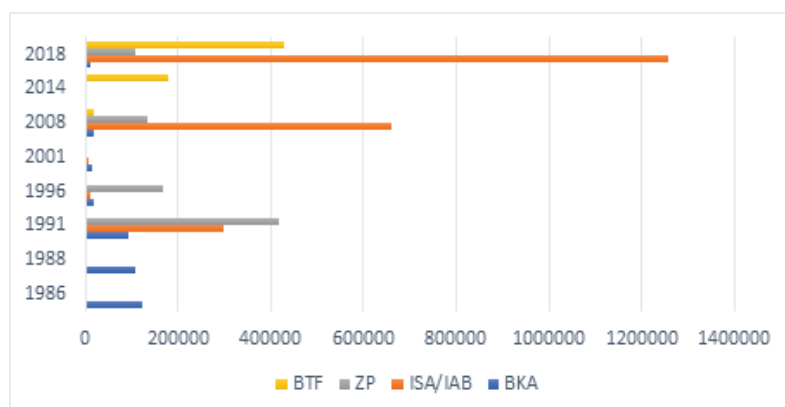
Figure 2: Performance of Pir-led Parties in national elections.

Conclusion

In post-independent Bangladesh three Pir-centred parties – BKA, ISA and ZP – emerged during the period of – what Werenfels (2014) has termed – selective political liberalisation. And the newest Pir-centred party BTF was set up in the context of existential challenges during the tenure of BNP-Jamaat alliance government. Each of these parties was co-opted by power elites or served as the latter's cooperative electoral contender. Their relationship with their activists-cum-murids has been largely fluid. Sometimes this takes the form of a Pir-muridi relationship, and at other times, their relationship assumes more overtly political colours. Their performance in electoral politics has been generally inconspicuous. In this respect, we can see similarities with the performances of their Egyptian and Lebanese counterparts (Ladjal & Bensaid 2015). Indeed, the cases explored here indicate that a Pir's following does not necessarily translate straightforwardly into votes at the time of elections. While madrasa-centred Pirs have engaged in agitational politics when they perceive that Islam is 'in danger', darbar/shrine-centred Pir-led parties in contrast have proved marginal in both agitational and electoral politics. Of course, it is possible that mainstream political parties deliberately preserve space for them with the aim of using their influence to curb what is believed to be the bigger challenge – radical Islamism.

Notes

[1]   This article uses Sufi and Pir synonymously. They generally refer to Muslim saints who offer spiritual and mystical training.

2   A derogatory term used by anti-Jamaat ulema to characterise the ideas propagated by Jamaat's founder Syed Abul Ala Maududi (1903-79).

3   No official count confirms this figure. Rather ZP leaders and activist generally hold the view that thirty million or three crore of the total population are with them. However, this seems to be a magic figure. Leaders and sympathisers of Charmonai and Dewanbaghi tradition also propagate that three crore people support them.

4   For more details, see The Members of Parliament (Remuneration and Allowances Order, 1973), amended in 2016.

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