

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF THE POLITICAL USE OF RELIGION IN BANGLADESH: CAUSES, PROCESS, AND CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand how religion plays a pivotal role in politics with a focus on the process through which amalgamation of religion and politics usually takes place, and how such amalgamation impacts the political sphere in Bangladesh. By using Riaz's political expediency theory, this paper argues that the political use of religion was institutionalized by the military regimes to consolidate their power base and while for democratic governments, the primary reason to use religion as a political agenda was to gain mass popularity. However, this tendency always possesses the risk of falling out of balance and creating communal tension. The purpose led to materializing drastic steps such as state-sponsored patronization, constitutional modification, depiction of religious attitudes by political leaders, political expediency, and application of digital platforms for political purpose, that eventually caused the amalgamation of religion and politics. The impact of such amalgamation is found primarily negative, including restricting attitude toward liberal ideology and threat to minorities.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Bangladesh, Impact, Process, Secularism

Introduction and background of the study

The influence of religion in political sphere is intrinsic in world politics from hundreds of years in both global North and global South. Albeit the rise of strict secular movement in the Middle Ages in Europe endeavored to relegate religion

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from political and social spectrum, yet the importance of religion has been instrumental even in the west today (Casanova, 1994). The paradigm started to shift during the 1980s owing to several incidents that took place during this era where religion was a key force. Several prominent theories are developed to explain the relation between religion and politics, such as secularism, post secularism, integrative theory, social movement theory, Gramscian discussion on hegemony, intellectual and moral reformation etc. Religion is still exerting its influence in global and national politics in the contemporary world (Majumder, 2016; Mostofa, 2021). It is particularly evident in South Asia which is home to world's largest adherents of Muslim, Hindu, and considerable number of Buddhist (Riaz, 2021). The baton to use religion as a political instrument is also heavily persistent in Bangladeshi political spectrum (Islam and Huda, 2016). Since the very birth of the independent Bangladesh, the question of political use of religion has been evident as a major political discourse in Bangladesh.

The very first constitution of Bangladesh banned religion-based politics led by the founding father of Bangladesh and the then prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (popularly known as Bangabandhu). One of the four principles of the constitution was secularism along with democracy, Bengali nationalism, and socialism (O'Connell 1976). The right-wing political camps started to frame the government as anti-religious while the government was strong not to create opportunistic atmosphere for the once banned right wing/ religion based political parties. As a response to the discourse that the secular leaning Awami League is discarding religion from politics and public sphere, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman argued that secularism does not mean religious lessness; instead, it is a constitutional guarantee to ensure freedom of religion (Islam 2020, Islam 2022) and an opportunity to create equal rights of the people belonging to different faiths. Albeit away from the Eurocentric rigid version of secularism as rigid secularism (Majumder 2016), the secularism of Bangladesh can be termed as soft secularism as exercised in countries like the USA and India. However, the critical camps point out the first government to use religion as political instrument in public sphere (Mostofa, 2021).

The constitution of Bangladesh, in 1972 upheld secularism as one of the four basic principles (Islam, 2011; Riaz, 2003, 2008; Yasmin, 2010) by the Mujib government. Communalism, the unique political status of any specific religion, political abuse of religion, and all forms of discrimination against any religion were eliminated by Article 12 of the Bangladesh Constitution, which provides the explanation of secularism (Bangladesh Constitution, 2011). The endeavor to implement secularism by the Mujib government through measures like allocating equal time for a recital of holy scripture of all religions in media broadcasts and planning to separate religious studies from compulsory education created public

dissatisfaction and backfired on the government (Mohsin, 2004). The regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is termed differently by scholars: secular-nationalist regime (Islam, 2015), "socialist-secular-Bengali nationalist" (Hashmi, 2003). Although secularism is one of the founding principles of the constitution, several scholars are of the opinion that the idea of secularism does not resonate the mass sentiment of Bangladesh (Islam and Islam, 2018; Griffiths and Hasan, 2015; Maniruzzaman, 1990; Yasmin, 2010).

Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, the military administrations of General Ziaur Rahman (1976–81) and General Ershad (1982–1990) amended Bangladesh's constitution and lifted the prohibition on religious parties, transforming the country from secular to Islamic (Islam, 2015). The regime of Ziaur Rahman is opined to possess some similarities with Ayub Khan's government (Franda, 1981, Ghosh, 1986). Zia familiarized the concept of "Bangladeshi Nationalism" in place of the long-familiar "Bengali Nationalism" (Hashmi, 2003; Choudhury, 1985), and the elements of this new concept included race, liberation war, language, culture, religion (Islam), territory and economy (Mohsin, 2004).

While Ziaur Rahman opted for establishing the 'Liberal Islamic Nationalism', Hussain Muhammad Ershad proceeded toward "Islamic Nationalism" during his regime (Mohsin, 2004). The Islamization policy of Hussain Muhammad Ershad is established on two main features: the promise of a mosque-based society and the inscription of Islam as the state religion in the constitution. Islam was recognized as a state religion in 1988 by Ershad through the Eighth Amendment (Riaz and Parvez, 2017; Anisuzzaman, 1994). Albeit the 11th amendment by the secular leaning Awami League has brought back secularism in the constitution but has kept Islam as the state religion (Islam, 2020).

Apart from historical point of views, the use of religion is persistent in various forms and ethos while the political elites want to misuse the public attitude towards religion (Mostofa, 2021). On such backdrops, the aim of the research is to identify the contributing factors that promote political use of religion in Bangladesh, key tools that are used for the amalgamation process and its impact in socio-political spheres. To spearhead the research, this study has been relied on the Ali Riaz's (2003) political expedience theory to explore the essential dynamics of political use of religion in Bangladesh.

Methodology

A flexible Research design of this study has been followed contingent on three aspects: availability of secondary literature, primary data and relevance of time (today's world) to achieve the objectives of the study. This study has used

qualitative approach to answer the dominant questions because qualitative approach provides leverage to go deep into a problem (Morsalin and Islam 2023). This study has used semi-structured interview method by using purposive sampling technique where twenty scholars in this field were interviewed. The respondents are mainly drawn from the University of Dhaka and have been considered as elite respondents who are well versed on such knowledge. This elite group includes political scientist, academics, and researchers. Qualitative approach has been evident as an effective and popular approach (Creswell, 2014) to explore socio-political dynamics from in-depth perspectives. A List of respondents has been provided in table 1.

Table 1: List of respondents and identity

Respondents	Unanimous identification	Identity
Respondent 1	A	Interfaith scholar and professor at Dhaka University
Respondent 2	B	Professor at Dhaka University and Historian
Respondent 3	C	Notable political scientist in Bangladesh and a professor at the University of Dhaka
Respondent 4	D	Philosopher and professor at Dhaka University
Respondent 5	E	Interfaith scholar
Respondent 6	F	Assistant Professor at Dhaka University, expert of religious freedom
Respondent 7	G	Post Graduated from University of Dhaka majoring in world Religions
Respondent 8	H	Interfaith scholar working in NGO
Respondent 9	I	Academic at Northern University, specialized on religious studies
Respondent 10	J	Journalist at BDnews, scholar on religion and politics
Respondent 11	K	Independent scholar, graduated from University of Dhaka
Respondent 12	L	Interfaith scholar

Respondent 13	M	Interfaith scholar
Respondent 14	N	Independent research, graduated from University of Dhaka majoring in world Religions
Respondent 15	O	Interfaith scholar
Respondent 16	P	Interfaith scholar
Respondent 17	Q	Interfaith scholar
Respondent 18	R	Interfaith scholar and working in government sector
Respondent 19	S	Interfaith activist
Respondent 20	T	Post Graduated from University of Dhaka majoring in world Religions

According to Morsalin and Islam (2023), semi-structured interview gives leverage to both respondents and interviewer to shed light on the important points relevant to the research. To facilitate proper interviews, relevant literatures were consulted for developing the research questions and other protocols. Interviews were transcribed and edited in line with the theme emerged during literature review.

The data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method where the codes were generated through the inductive process. In addition, few themes emerged from the literatures. Analysis has been written in line with themes of the study and data triangulation was carried out by the available secondary literature where required.

Literature Review

Religious components in politics are as old as humanity (Beyers, 2015). The diversity of religious expression in politics prevents any universally applicable single-factor approach (Wald, 2005). Religion becomes a social phenomenon and holds political significance when individuals in a society act, respond, organize, or unify based on faith (Choudhury, 1985). The long practice of keeping religion and politics separate entities changed during the 1980s with the growing influence of religion in the domestic politics of many countries, irrespective of the geographic location and the governing system (Riaz, 2010). The four world events of the 1980s where religion played a key role includes the successful Islamic revolution in Iran, the Solidarity movement in Poland, the influence of Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution and resurgence of Protestant fundamentalism in the politics of America (Casanova, 1994).

Fox (2018) regarded religion as "one of the few things that can legitimize nearly anything"; hence, had been utilized for the legitimization of governments, support opposition movements, shape policies, and institutions. Analyzing the historical context of politics in South Africa and Japan, Beyers (2015) identified six core reasons for the political use of religion, which are: the long tradition of religious participation, infliction of emotional response, religious influence in shaping national identity, claim of divine support for a political decision, and religious communities' effectiveness for working in favor of implementing government policies, however countries with Muslim demography had been purposefully omitted in this study arguing the religion had unique element as a political force.

The academic discussion on religion and politics will be impossible without addressing the view of social scientists of the twentieth century who considered religion irrelevant, leading to the application of secularism: the dominant theory that prevailed during the contemporary period (Fox, 2018). Sen (2005) regarded the separation of religion and state as secularism from a political sense rather than an ecclesiastical one. He presented two broader interpretations of secularism: the first one demands the state to maintain equidistant from religions, whereas the second interpretation, severe in nature, demands the state to detach from all relations to religion. Secularism continued to prevail in the Western World; however, in the Third World countries, secular political ideologies like socialism and liberal democracy are not always seen as the most useful for achieving group goals; instead, religion, possibly associated with nationalism, ethnicity, or communalism, frequently serves as a mobilizing oppositional ideology (Haynes, 1997). Despite the genuine criticism against the concept of secularism and some secular state, Bhargava (2013) argues that secularism can be rehabilitated through exploration beyond the mainstream Western concept, recognition of non-Western practices where the concept meets the exclusive demands of its society and, lastly, understanding that secularism is not 'against religion but against institutionalized religion domination of the secular'.

Post-secular societies, according to Habermas (2008), are the ones where the societies "adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment" (Habermas, 2008). Mavelli and Petito (2012) identified two broad uses for applying the word 'post-secularism.' The first group used the term to refer to the return of religion, which led to the endeavor to introduce a theoretical framework to explain the modern-day phenomenon and to develop new political models into which religion would be integrated into it. In contrast, the second form of meaning leans toward a sort of radical theorizing, and secularism is associated with a potential plot for "isolation, domination, violence, exclusion". The elements that are attributed to the re-emergence of religion are the spread of missionary activities, fundamentalist radicalization, and the "political

instrumentalization of the potential for violence" present in world religions (Habermas, 2008). Beckford (2012) criticizes post secularity on three points: first, the wide range of definition, sometimes contradictory; second, uncertainty of existence despite scholastic literature, and last, somewhat lacking of empirical data. Albeit those studies are inextricably helpful to understand the interplay of religion and politics; but cannot answer it from inclusive perspective in regards to Bangladesh case which has led this paper to adopt the study of Ali Riaz (2003) as central theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The “hegemony crisis-political expediency” framework of Ali Riaz (2003) on the context of Bangladesh identifies two key elements that contributed to the rise of Islamism. Nationalism as a hegemonic ideology emerged during the mid-1960s lost its place after the independence and the ruling parties, unable to create a new ideology, eventually faced the legitimacy crisis. The absence of ideology persisted after the assassination of Mujib, so his successors, the military governments, turned to religion to legitimize power. The political parties followed by the military administrations continued the use political expediency.

Riaz (2021) later included several more elements with it in “interplay of religion and politics” where three domestic elements and two global elements were factored in. It is important to note that the discussion between religion and politics here mainly includes the influence of Islam in politics and vice versa because of its historic ties and demographic stronghold. The domestic factors include the omnipresence of Islam in every aspect of Bangladeshi society, the moral crisis of governing parties and the political expediency of secular parties. For global elements, rise of political Islam in the international arena and interaction of Bangladesh with Middle Eastern and Gulf countries. Islam arrived in the Indian subcontinent centuries ago and with time, the pervasive, synergistic form of the religion was accepted in the Eastern Bengal which remained relevant to the personal and social life of its citizens.

Riaz claimed that social Islamization focused more on ideology than theology and promoted a more conservative interpretation developed with the help of several Islamist organizations during the 1980s. This ubiquity of Islam was extended to the political landscape in the absence of moral legitimacy of the administrators. Although the Mujib government started on strong foot as the first official government of Bangladesh, the 1973 election, according to the author, created a legitimacy crisis. Riaz (2021) claims that although secularism was constitutionalized during the Mujib regime, the leader leaned to practices that prioritize Islamic ethos. The Zia regime descended to power following several

coups and counter coups and “was neither constitutionally or morally legitimate” (Riaz, 2021). The attempt to introduce a separate ideology than his predecessor lead him to solidify the political use of religion.

He also argues that the political use of religion is also evident in the post-military regime where both Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party use religion as a political instrument. During popular elections, they have been seen to use heavily religious slogans and symbols to pacify the voters (Riaz 2003). Such inceptions from the democratic parties have resulted in various socio-political impacts.

The above stated theory will be used in line with the themes of the research and to meet the objectives of this study. The fundamental application will be of exploration of political use of religion in three broad dynamics: the causes of the amalgamation, the process of using religion as political instrument and the impacts of such politics.

Results

The results have been explained in line with the objectives and themes of this study. Sub-themes were emerged during data coding and the analysis has been written based on both primary and secondary data. In broad outline, this study has explained data from three dynamics as set out previous sections: the causes, the process and the impacts.

Causes of Political Use of Religion

The historic ties of political use of religion in the Indian subcontinent:

The use of religion in the political landscape of Bangladesh is neither surprising nor a new phenomenon. The political parties who succumbed to the practice simply took a leaf from the history of the Indian Subcontinent. Respondents B, C, D, F, M and T emphasized on the historical events as one of the contributing factors of political use of religion in present Bangladesh emphasizing that the entire Pakistan Project was based on the very issue. While both respondent D and F regarded political use of religion an old phenomenon, and claimed this phenomenon is witnessed in both before and after the partition took place in 1947, respondent C explained the reason behind prevalence of such practice in South Asia is the high religiosity of its people. Respondent C who is a political scientist holds:

“The Partition of 1947 was based on an erred theoretical proposition where religion was presented as a central element of nationalism and other elements like, language, culture had been ignored. If religion was

the only tying element of a nation, then Pakistan would not have been broken apart. During the period of 37-47, the two nation theory was presented and taught in a way that religion itself is nationalism.”

Establishing the Legitimacy

Under Khondokar Mushtaque’s presidency, Islam became a tool of convenience to achieve legitimacy, and he proclaimed different plans for Islamizing the constitution of Bangladesh (Hussain, 1997). Sheikh and Ahmed (2020) argues that the de facto military leaders, Ziaur Rahman and Hossain Muhammad Ersahd, used Islam as an authoritarian strategy to maintain social control, exercise repression and gain legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Several respondents (for instance A, C, D, E and F) mentioned the era of military rule distinctly as the period of political use of religion, where the goal was to legitimize and maintain power. To understand the motive behind using Islam as a political tool by military rulers, it is important to focus on one of the important characteristics of the contemporary political landscape. Respondent C mentions:

“In the post-independent Bangladesh, both the government party and opposition party were against the two nation theory. The Bangabandhu government restricted all kinds of religious political parties while the opposition parties like Jasod, NAP upheld Bengali nationalism. Ziaur Rahman, after coming into power, endeavored to present a new package to retaliate against the political parties. And the only feasible package they had at their disposal was that of religion.”

Political Expediency of Secular Forces

Political parties have been pursuing Islamic parties to form administrations since the early 1990s, which has accomplished the process of rehabilitating religio-political forces as "an integral component of Bangladesh's polity" (Hossain, 2012). Riaz (2003) argued that the emergence of Islam as a political ideology and the growing influence of Islamic parties are attributed to the hegemony crisis of the ruling class and political expediency of “secularist” parties. Three of the respondents (C, D and S) claimed that although military rulers use religion for establishing the legitimacy of their rule, it’s prevalence existed due to the is political expediency of self-proclaimed secular political parties who submitted to the very practice to maintain public support. The respondents drew attention to BNP’s relation to Jamat-I-Islam and Awami Leagues’ strategic position towards Hefazat-e-Islam. Some of the respondents (A, G, H, I, O, T) emphasized that the reason behind emphasizing on Islam by political parties is because it is the religion of the majority of the population. Drawing the support of the majority means winning at the electoral votes, thus ensuring the ultimate power.

External Influence

The four coordinated attacks on America in 2001, known as 9/11, had a global impact. Hossain (2012) emphasized that the subject of Islamist activity, since the event of 9/11, has been closely examined under two main categories. Firstly, the Islamic resurgence signals the restoration of historical status Islam had in Bangladeshi culture and politics. Second, that it symbolizes a radical, anti-Western movement aiming to create a "Talibanized" Islamic state. Griffiths and Hasan (2015) claims, "After 9/11, Bangladesh was one of several bases for globally networked Islamists proclaiming a Jihad against the West as well as against democracy in Bangladeshi".

Respondent C opined that, through the coordinated attacks by Al-Qaeda that killed 2,977 Americans, the terrorist group were able to send a message to the world that even America, one of the most powerful countries, is not invincible. The extremists group could also capitalize on the catastrophe followed by the retaliation of America such as the invasion in Afghanistan, Iraq. The misery and death of millions of Muslim provided a ground for them to create anti-West sentiment.

Amalgamation of Religion and Politics

State-sponsored Patronization of Religion

Scholars like Husain (1997), Islam and Islam (2018), Griffiths and Hasan (2015) claim that the process of Islamization commenced during the Mujib regime. Hashmi (2003) claims that the successors of Mujib utilized political Islam, a form of state-sponsored Islam to establish legitimacy. One of the immediate steps implemented by Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmed who grabbed the position of Presidency after the coup of August 1975, includes halting Hindu religious programs telecasted in Radio and television (Ghosh, 1986) and using phrases like "Mercy of the Almighty Allah" (Husain, 1997).

The Zia regime introduced posters of Quranic verses in government offices (Mohsin, 1982). He also responded to the conservative demand to declare Friday as a half-holiday, transfer female traffic police to desk jobs and introduce modernized curriculum in religious schools or Madrasas (Khan, 1984). The successor of Zia, Hossain Muhammad Ershad also undertook certain measures, to show his alliance towards Islam, the most prominent of which is declaring Islam as the state religion (Ahmed and Nazneen, 1990). He used to address the Friday congregation, urging people to come to the path of Islam. On the issue of state-sponsored political use of religion, Respondent C opined that,

“State is the most powerful organization, and the state-run projects can create massive influence. During the military regimes, the first organized

attack on secularism came from the state through constitutional amendments such as the 5th and 8th amendment, and providing administrative power to people who held pro-Pakistan sentiments.”

Respondent D, on the other hand, emphasized on the mechanism of implementing the ideology of the military rulers, that he argues, includes two important features: propaganda and reward distribution. The propaganda circulated among the mass level presented secularism as faithlessness, and a binary opposition of identity was created. And for the individuals who supported the regime and the de facto leaders were incentivized and rewarded. While Zia adopted a strategic position of neutralizing adversaries such as removing the elements from the Armed Forces that inspired the force to become a people's army and reinforcing new allies by providing the officials of the force with benefits and privileges, Ershad distributed favors for legalize his position constitutionally (Ghosh, 1986).

While respondent G and J maintained that the amalgamation of religion and politics in terms of contemporary Bangladesh is quite minimal and religion is more of a catalyst than the mainstream influence, interviewee L mentioned that the amalgamation can take place positively through granting special favor to the minorities and appointing them in important ranks.

Constitutional Changes and politics of expediency of both military and democratic forces

Constitutional amendment, in most cases, is preferred by political leaders as a method to maintain control over a particular agenda, instead of creating a new constitution which might expose every aspect of the current one to discussion, leading to a less controlled situation (Constitutional Insights, 2018). During the regime of Ziaur Rahman, the constitution was “given a definite Islamic orientation” (Husain, 1997). Several constitutional changes during his regime including omission of secularism through fifth amendment, introduction “Faith in the Almighty Allah” at the beginning of the constitution in 1977, and alteration of the words liberation struggle and socialism to “war of independence” and “social and economic justice” (Anisuzzaman, 1994).

In addition to the ban on Islamic political parties was withdrawn in 1978 (Mostofa and Subedi, 2021). Ershad, continuing the tradition of Islamization initiated by his past government, proposed the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution on June 7, 1988, which declared Islam the state religion of Bangladesh (Ahmed and Nazneen, 1990). However, the 5th, 8th and 13th amendment were declared illegal by the apex court later on and 15th amendment was declared under the Awami League government, on 30th June, 2011, which included reestablishment of secularism in the constitution and prohibition of religion based politics along with 55 changes

(Rashid, 2011). Although the 8th amendment was declared illegal, the clause of Islam as a state religion remained unchanged (Mostofa 2021).

Literatures drew attention towards the spearhead of the military administrations, insisting analyzing the personal traits of Ziaur Rahman and Hussaid Muhammad Ershad during their regime would provide more examples of how they incorporated religious symbols personally to tune in with mass religious sentiments (Riaz, 2013; Mostofa, 2021, Islam 2022). Both the military rulers attempted to create an Islamic image which would signal Muslim identity that, according to respondent C, stood in contrast to Bengali identity. During the period of military administration, religious sentiments and religious symbols had been misused. Respondent I claim that wearing religious attire makes the leaders appear more pure-hearted, someone who keeps his promises. However, respondent H raised an important question in this regard. According to her it would be incorrect to conclude that personal habits of political leaders like Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, such as, covering the head, initiating the speeches with Bismillah, are directed to achieve political agenda. Since the religiosity in Islam is demonstrated through both external and internal expressions, these behaviors can be act of religiousness on their parts.

Digital Platforms

Anam (2022) inferred a common pattern concerning the strategy through which the communal conflicts commenced, “a patterned onslaught”, based on instances of Ramu, Ukhiya and Teknaf (2012), Nasirnagar (2016), Bhola (2019), Sunamganj, Chandpur, Cumilla and Rangpur (2021). He writes that “almost of these incidents originating from a Facebook post showing a member of minority community allegedly disrespecting Islam” which then go viral in social media, following creation of protest groups, demand of punishment of the culprit, attacks on minority groups which typically commence with the attack on the alleged person. Exploitation of social media platforms regarding political use and religious extremism is a new phenomenon, according to interviewee H. She backed her opinion with the Narail instance where claims were made of hurting religious sentiments by a Hindu college professor resulting in vandalization and destruction of property.

One of the participants, respondent C regarded the launch of digital platforms as a game changer for “people who want to use religion for political purposes” adding, “digital platforms are a more powerful tool than nuclear weapons. And in the name of Islam, they preach a certain version of Islam, a more rigid and extreme version”. Their presence and activity in the digital platforms indicate three things: they want

to remain politically important; they possess particular distaste for believers of other faiths, and, in most of the cases, they project misogynistic behavior.

Effect of Political Use of Religion

Attack on Liberal ideology

Any crisis has negative impacts including socio-economic and political (Siddika and Islam, 2023). The influence of "religionists" - the people with the interest in obtaining political power while being critical about scientific knowledge and intolerant towards other faiths, had been magnified with time in Bangladesh and the presence can be noticed in the gradual increase of violence against religious minorities and attempt to degenerate free speech (Ahmad, 2020). The country witnessed the murders of many bloggers and activists from 2013 onwards (Islam, 2020).

While three of the participants (B, C, S) held that the religious extremists hold opposing values of liberal ideology, one of the respondents believed associating every minuscule social issue with religious sentiments and symbolism diminished the dream of a civil society. Respondents C and B held that when religion is used in politics, one of the first attacks comes on freedom of speech and thought, where people are forced to accept a fixed mindset and lifestyle. The long-term effect would lead to intellectual mediocrity, according to respondent D. In addition, respondent C says:

“Ethnically, the Bengalis exhibited intellectual prowess. However, the potential Bangladesh could showcase to the world is lost. I think, at one point, we would be economically solvent but intellectually mediocre because of the attack on free thinking.”

Similar sentiment had been professed by respondent D for the recognition of Qawmi madrasa degree as equivalent to master's degree by the Sheikh Hasina government in 2017. Furthermore, the interviewees expressed concerns that amalgamation of religion and politics can endanger the path to democracy. When religious sentiments mixed into politics and the very practice is standardized in the society, the voting process is mostly led by religious sentiments making reasoning less important, claims respondent C.

Threat to Minorities

Mostofa (2021C) argues that the minority rights in Bangladesh is at stake on the ground that approximately 3600 attacks were brought on religious minorities between 2013 to 2021. Such attacks have socio-religious and historical elements, such as, a sense of proxy victimization, religious animosity, legacy of the colonial

period, differences among different religions and communal mindset. Furthermore, the increasing use of religion with its discriminatory legal acts, such as Vested Property Acts, and principles against the minorities that found its way from East Pakistan to Bangladesh after 1971 leaned more towards the majority both in terms of ideology and legal rights, and gradually reduced individuals as vote banks (Mohsin, 2014, Islam, 2022).

Respondents C, M, O, P and T mentioned that the communication gap between minority and majority groups of Bangladesh are increasing, especially with the Hindu community, compelling them to form a kind of social cyst. They had been attacked numerous times for political purposes. According to respondent M, although the legitimization of state religion appears to be favorable to the majority (according to respondent M) and a section of majority prefers the political use of religion since they are in favorable side (according to O, P and T), its long-term efficacy remains questionable. The respondent believes that there is a risk of confrontation, the materialization of which can harm people from both sides. Participant F spoke about the politics of votes in terms of the minorities and claimed that the ten percent of the population can have significant importance when it comes to election. He mentioned the heightened attacks and vandalization of the minorities are done to coerce their votes.

Religious violence and Rise of Reactionary Group

Islam and Siddika (2020) and Siddika (2021) identified political use of religion as a contributing factor behind the religious extremism in Bangladesh reasoning “it kept the gate open for religious extremists participating in politics and thus spreading ideology in society” Islam and Siddika (2020). Participant A indicated that if abuse of religion by the elites increases, it can lead to political turmoil and can result in the creation of a reactionary group who stands against the misuse and work for preaching the true teachings of religion. However, this is a risky path. Every religion has different schools, and the religious teachings have numerous interpretations. Respondent N, however, mentions:

“The government can be pressurized and challenged if policies are not undertaken in the favor of the majority and can result in a political conflict. The solution is to ensure religious freedom and inclusion of every citizen while formulating policies.”

Discussion and conclusion

The study exhumes the reasons behind the political use of religion, the process or tools applied for the amalgamation of religion, and its possible consequences in the context of Bangladesh. The study indicates several core reasons behind the political use of religion. The findings resonate the theoretical development of political expediency of Ali Riaz (2003). Firstly, the past instances of communal

tension, riot and eventual Partition familiarize the opportunists of the tactics of misusing religion still acting as a road map for them. Secondly, the sudden void and legitimacy crisis that arose after the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh was attempted to be overcome by patronizing Islam, the religion of the majority population, to gain public acceptance and trust by the military rulers (Islam 2022). The numerous fundamental changes in terms of both policy and constitution in favor of religion during the military regime resulted in an irretrievable path. The democratic political parties subsequently leaned towards political expediency and formulated alliance with different Islamist parties which gave rise to political use of religion.

Fourthly, the inherent God-fearing attitude, refusal to question notions set forth in the name of religion as well as lack of proper religious education enables the path of political use of religion easier for the religious leaders. Lastly, external factors, such as unsupervised foreign funding and the aftermath of 9/11 on the domestic level created an environment conducive to exert influence by religious parties.

The factors that contributed to the political use of religion had to undergo different processes to manifest the amalgamation of religion and politics. In this study, we discovered several such processes, which are, state sponsorship, constitutional change, mimicking religious image, act of political expediency and digital platforms. Military governments sponsored patronization of religion for political expediency. Such footsteps were also followed by democratic governments too.

The usage of social media platforms like Facebook emerged as a substantial force through which attacks on minorities had been orchestrated. Using religion for gaining political advantage mostly resulted in negative consequences, according to our findings. Individuals from both the majority and minority can be affected by it. Individuals with secular ideologies had been attacked in the past years as an attempt to curb different views and restrict freedom of expression and freedom of thought. Minorities are the most vulnerable ones. Thousands of cases bear testimony of the atrocities committed against them.

The long practice of religion-based politics and its aftermath can negatively affect the international branding of the country, which in turn, can interfere with the economic growth. Moreover, the ongoing arrangement between religion and politics always poses the risk of falling out of harmonious balance and giving rise to religious extremism and reactionary groups. We argue that, bringing religious sentiment into the political arena is a risky business and political elites do that because of political expediency. Obedience along with political power can expose them to a greater power and position of domination which can be used for an agenda preferred to them.

Funding: Centennial Research Grant 2021, University of Dhaka

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