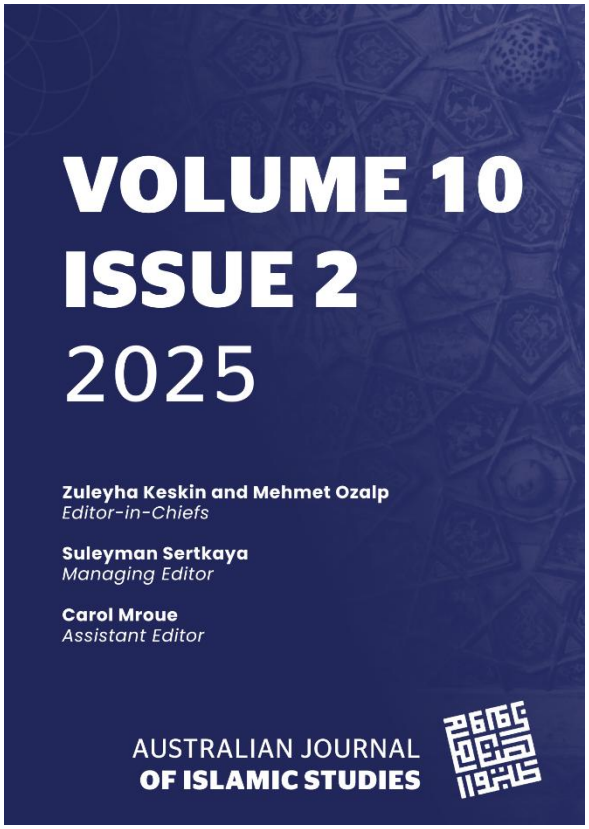

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THE SHIFTING STANDS OF SECULARIMS: BANGLADESH'S RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM

Md. Mahdi Hasan* and Bhirawa Anoraga**

Abstract: This article explores the shifting discourses and practices of secularism and Islamisation in Bangladesh, focusing on how the country's secular identity has shifted since its beginning. The study addresses the central issue of how successive regimes have reinterpreted or diluted it to serve ideological and political objectives. This study argues that, although Bangladesh was founded as a secular state in 1972, the constitutional amendment in 1988 that declared Islam as the state religion reflects a significant and historical tension between secularism and religious identity. This tension has given rise to a distinctive form of secularism that Bangladesh has upheld throughout its history. We further contend that the relationship between religion and secularism is multifaceted in the context of the country, where the secular principles of Bangladesh do not denote the elimination of religion. Religious actors have the freedom to express their faiths in the public sphere, even though, to some extent, they undermine secular principles. The article also examines one secular political strategy – the slogan "*Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār*" (one's religion is one's own, but festivals are for everyone) – which highlights individual religious beliefs and identity while promoting communal celebration. The debates surrounding this slogan reveal how religious inclusivity is celebrated and contested in public life, reflecting deeper tensions between communal harmony and religious boundaries. It contributes to the broader understanding of secularism by demonstrating how secular principles in Muslim-majority contexts, like Bangladesh, are pragmatically reconfigured in response to political and religious pressures.

Keywords: *Bangladesh*, *secularism*, *Islamisation*, *conservatism*, *government*, *secular*, *Islamist*, *Ḥifāzat-e-Islām*

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INTRODUCTION

The debates surrounding modernisation and secularisation have coloured scholarly discourse in the social sciences since the mid-20th century, especially within studies focusing on Muslim-majority countries. These countries have often been assumed to fail to incorporate secularism in their modern political and social frameworks.[1] Bangladesh is one such country where these dynamics are particularly pronounced and is the focus of this study.[2]

Bangladesh is one of the largest Muslim countries in the world, with a Muslim population of almost 150 million or 91.4%. It is the fourth-largest Muslim nation globally, ranking after India, Pakistan and Indonesia.[3] The official religion of Bangladesh is Islam.[4] The country's Hindu population, comprising 7.95% of the total population, is the second-largest minority, with 13.1 million identifying as Hindus, making it the third-largest Hindu-populated country globally following India and Nepal, with 0.61%, clinging to Buddhism, while Christians make up a mere 0.30%.[5] The other individuals identify with indigenous religions or animism.[6]

Initially, Bangladesh, as an independent country, adopted secular ideas. Secularism was officially established as the state's core value in the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh, commonly known as religious impartiality or "*dharma nirapekkhata*" in Bengali.[7] However, in its development, Islamisation or the growing influence of Islam on the state's socio-political orientation rapidly supplanted secularism within a brief timeframe. Official and non-governmental Islamist organisations instigated the gradual weakening of secularism and the ascendancy of Islam in the country.[8] Thus, despite being founded as a secular state, Bangladesh

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1 Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," in *The New Social Theory Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Steven Seidman and Jeffrey C. Alexander (Routledge, 2020). For further reading, see, Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 2011), https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Clash-of-Civilizations-and-the-Remaking-of-World-Order/Samuel-P-Huntington/9781451628975; Mukhammadsidiqov Mukhammadolim, "Problems of Regulation of Secularism and Religious Principles in Arab Countries," *Bulletin Social-Economic and Humanitarian Research* 4, no. 6 (2019).

2 Abdul Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'? A Complex Case of Bangladesh," *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2021): 1; Rokeya Chowdhury, *From 'Secular' to 'Islamo-Secular' Bangladesh: Mapping the Constitutional Trajectories through Law, Religion, and Performing Arts* (McGill University, 2021), 19–29; Akhand Akhtar Hossain, "Islamism, Secularism and Post-Islamism: The Muslim World and the Case of Bangladesh," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 24, no. 2 (2016).

3 Rajeev Rana, "Bangladesh Population 2025 & Religious Demographics: Trends & Insights," Find Easy, accessed January 4, 2024, https://www.findeasy.in/population-of-bangladesh/.

4 Despite being founded as a secular state in 1972, Bangladesh later amended its constitution to declare Islam as the state religion in 1988. This amendment suggests ongoing debate about the compatibility of secularism and Islam as the state's ideology.

5 Rana, "Bangladesh Population 2025 & Religious Demographics: Trends & Insights."

6 Ala Uddin, "Politics of Secularism and the State of Religious Pluralism in Bangladesh," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015).

7 Md Nazrul Islam and Md Saidul Islam, "Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh: Contesting the Dominant Narratives," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (2018): 7.

8 Ali Riaz, "Interactions of 'Transnational' and 'Local' Islam in Bangladesh," in *Transnational Islam in South and Southeast Asia: Movements, Networks, and Conflict Dynamics* (The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2009); Ali Riaz, "More than Meets the Eye: The Narratives of Secularism and Islam in Bangladesh," in *Ghosts from the Past?*, ed. Neeti Nair, Michael Kugelman and Bijan Omrani (Routledge, 2021); Uddin, "Politics of Secularism."

later amended its constitution to declare Islam as the state religion in 1988. This declaration does not change the country's status as a secular state, given the country does not implement Islamic laws despite Islam being the official religion.[9] Nevertheless, this amendment suggests ongoing debates about the compatibility of secularism and Islam as the state's ideology.

Given this background, this article addresses the research questions: How has the relationship between secularism and religious identity evolved in Bangladesh since its founding in 1972? In what ways does Bangladesh interpret its model of secularism and how does this interpretation differ from other paradigms, such as the Anglo-American and French (assertive) models? What historical, political and socio-cultural factors have contributed to the development of Bangladesh's distinctive form of secularism?

This study draws on the secularisation theory to make sense of this occurrence, especially the one introduced by Talal Asad, who views secularism not as a mere privatisation of religion but also a political doctrine imposed by the government. According to Asad, secularism is "an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion."[10] Michel Hoebink also views secularism as a doctrine seeking the separation of religious authority from political power, specifically within the state.[11] In other words, secularism is not just an abstract idea, but also a set of governmental actions and policies through which the state governs its citizens and seeks to bridge social divisions rooted in class, gender and religion. Thus, this set of governmental actions has led to a variety of concepts, practices and sensibilities to form "the secular."

This study argues, although Bangladesh was founded as a secular state in 1972, the constitutional amendment in 1988 that declared Islam as the state religion reflects a significant and historical tension between secularism and religious identity. We further contend that this tension has given rise to a distinctive form of secularism that Bangladesh has upheld throughout its history. The original concept of secularism in the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh reflects Anglo-American secularism, which emphasises state neutrality toward religion. This stands in contrast to the French interpretation of secularism or what scholars refer to as "assertive secularism."[12] The latter underlines the total eradication of religion.[13]

Sheikh Mujībur Raḥmān,[14] the architect of independent Bangladesh, defines his notion of secularism:

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9 Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Secularism* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 338–44.

10 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.

11 Michel Hoebink, "Thinking about Renewal in Islam: Towards a History of Islamic Ideas on Modernization and Secularization," *Arabica* 46, no. 1 (1999), https://www.jstor.org/stable/4057249.

12 Ahmet T. Kuru, "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007).

13 To know more about Anglo-American or French interpretation of secularism, see Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (OUP USA, 2009), 103–70.

14 Islam and Islam, "Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh," 7.

> Secularism does not denote the lack of religion. You faithfully adhere to the Islamic faith and conscientiously observe your religious practices. Individuals adhering to Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions will be granted the freedom to partake in their religious rituals without restrictions. Bangladesh possesses irreligiousness yet it embraces secularism. The underlying message conveyed by this statement is that it is deemed undesirable for anybody to exploit folks by using religion as a cover or to form tyrannical factions such as *al-Badr, Razakārs*,[15] and similar entities. The practice of communal politics will be completely forbidden within the nation. Have you comprehended my four key principles?[16]

Mujīb's secularism was symbolised by the unprecedented recognition of all religions, a concept coined by Manīruzzamān as "multi-theocracy."[17] During an interview, the principal author of the Bangladesh constitution, Dr. Kamāl Ḥusaīn, asserts that the turbulent political climate in Pakistan, which engaged religious manipulation, "compelled us to embrace secularism in the constitution."[18]

Historically and theologically, Islamic empires had accommodated non-Muslims' rights and equality under the caliphate.[19] However, to understand Mujībur Raḥmān's preference for secularism over Islam, it is imperative to comprehend Bangladesh's historical background against West Pakistan. Their statements do not condemn religion, but religious communalism and improper utilisation of religion in the political sphere, which serve to fragment society. Such divisions are pronounced in contexts like Pakistan, where religious bias is embedded within the political system.[20]

Furthermore, a former Member of the Parliament and Executive President of a political party within the *Jatiya Samājtantrik Dal*, the late Mayʿeen Uddīn Khān Badal, claimed that "secularism in Bangladesh simply signifies the absence of communalism and religious neutrality." Badal further stated, "This secularism is distinct from the Western model of secularism, which rejects transcendental authority." However, the doctrine of secularism encountered growing disapproval; hence, Mujīb was frequently in need of reaffirming that neither he nor his understanding of secularism opposed religion:[21]

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15 The groups known as *al-Badr* and *Razakaars* were implicated in committing war crimes during the Bangladesh independence war in 1971.

16 The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has four pillars or principles of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism [Article 8(1)]. For more, see Joseph T. O'Connell, "The Bengali Muslims and the State: Secularism or Humanity for Bangladesh?," in *Understanding the Bengal Muslims*, ed. Rafiuddin Ahmed (Oxford University Press, 2001); Mohammad Musfequs Salehin, "Democracy and Islam: A Tale of Democratic Struggle in a Muslim Majority State," *Sociology of Islam* 1, no. 1–2 (2013).

17 Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Bangladesh Politics: Secular and Islamic Trends," in *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*, ed. Rafiuddin Ahmed (South Asian Publishers, 1990), 70.

18 Islam and Islam, "Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh," 7.

19 Engineer, *Islam and Secularism*, 338-44; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam* (Islamic Texts Society, 2002), 145–60.

20 Vali Nasr, "Blurring the Line: Islam and Politics in South Asia," *Harvard International Review* 18, no. 3 (1996); Ishtiaq Ahmed, "The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia," in *The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Ishtiaq Ahmed (Routledge, 2011). For further information, see Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

21 Islam and Islam, "Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh," 7.

> There is a malicious notion circulating that we do not adhere to the Islamic faith. Our stance on this matter is unequivocal. We hold a nonbelief in the nomenclature of Islam. We uphold the Islamic principle of justice. Our faith is that which the pious and benevolent Prophet taught us.[22]

Thus, it should be clarified that secular society, such as Bangladesh, does not endorse atheism and secularism does not advocate for resistance to religion.[23] From the essentialist perspective, Islam and secularism are often viewed as contradictory.[24] However, empirically, scholars have found a nuanced relationship between the two, especially in politics.[25] This nuanced relationship is partially shaped by Islamic theology that does not specifically endorse a political form.[26] Thus, some Muslim-majority countries, especially where non-Muslims make up a significant number of populism, opt for secularism as in Indonesia, Turkey, Malaysia and Bangladesh.[27] Again, their preference over secularism does not mean a rejection of religion, yet the separation of religion and state is deemed necessary to protect Islam from misuse by the powerful, while still allowing religious values to inform legislation in a non-sectarian manner.[28] This principle, however, has also provided an opportunity for Islamists to employ this concept to further their agenda.[29]

One can uphold religious beliefs while endorsing civic democratic politics. On the other hand, it is also feasible to keep a strong religious belief while advocating for a political philosophy that opposes democracy. The manifestation of this dualism is observed in Islam and Islamism. Islam, as a religion, can peacefully coexist with civil democratic norms.

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22 Muhammad A. Hakim, "The Use of Islam as a Political Legitimization Tool: The Bangladesh Experience, 1972–1990," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 2 (1998): 104.

23 Salehin, "Democracy and Islam." For more information, see Burhanuddin Khan Jahangir, *Nationalism, Fundamentalism, and Democracy in Bangladesh* (International Centre for Bengal Studies, 2002).

24 Gabriele Marranci, *Muslim Societies and the Challenge of Secularization: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Springer, 2010), 1–8.

25 Alfred Stepan, for instance, argues for several distinct types of secularism found in democratic and non-democratic regimes, including: (1) Separatist Secularism: Strict separation of religion and state, often with restrictions on religious expression in public institutions (e.g., France); (2) Established Religion: States that officially recognise a religion but maintain democratic governance (e.g., the UK with the Church of England); (3) Positive Accommodation: States that actively support and accommodate religious diversity through policies and legal frameworks (e.g., India); (4) Respect All, Positive Cooperation, and Principled Distance: A model where the state maintains a principled distance but cooperates positively with religious groups (e.g., some Scandinavian countries). See, Alfred Stepan, "Muslims and Toleration: Unexamined Contributions to the Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democracies," in *Boundaries of Toleration*, ed. Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor (Columbia University Press, 2014).

26 Nehaluddin Ahmad, "The Modern Concept of Secularism and Islamic Jurisprudence: A Comparative Analysis," *Annual Survey of International and Comparative Law* 15 (2009): 75; Engineer, *Islam and Secularism*, Chapter 19.

27 Martin van Bruinessen, "Secularism, Islamism, and Muslim Intellectualism in Turkey and Indonesia: Some Comparative Observations," in *Ketika Makkah Menjadi Las Vegas: Agama, Politik Dan Ideologi*, ed. Mirza Tirta Kusuma, 130–57 (Gramedia, 2014); Gerhard Hoffstaedter, "Secular State, Religious Lives: Islam and the State in Malaysia," *Asian Ethnicity* 14, no. 4 (2013).

28 Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 1–44; Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-20.

29 Lamia Karim, "Democratizing Bangladesh: State, NGOs, and Militant Islam," *Cultural Dynamics* 16, no. 2–3 (2004); Salehin, "Democracy and Islam," 103.

Nevertheless, Islamism is a political philosophy that is fundamentally opposed to democracy.[30] Understanding this complex differentiation is essential to foster a community that supports the simultaneous presence of democratic principles and religious faith.

However, there has been a surge in lethal assaults against some progressive, leftist and pro-secular activists in Bangladesh that has coincided with the growth of the Islamic State in the Middle East.[31] Over this time, several leftist publishers, bloggers and media personnel in Bangladesh faced persistent death threats stemming from accusations of disseminating anti-Islamic narratives. In Bangladesh, like in other regions, some militants exploited bloodshed to suppress opposition.[32]

On the one hand, events like the alteration of secular content in textbooks and the removal of a monument from the Supreme Court grounds in 2017 have sparked concern among proponents of secularism in Bangladesh. These developments raised questions about whether the country can still be accurately described as secular.[33] In a similar vein, the ongoing struggle between secular governance and religious conservatism is reflected in the vandalism of statues by religious conservatives following the downfall of the former government, Bangladesh Awami League (AL), on 5 August 2024, and the formation and subsequent dissolution of a 10-member committee by the newly established interim government in September 2024 to revise textbooks.[34] This recurring tension between educational reform and religious influence

30 For further readings, see Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito, *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East* (NYU Press, 2000); Mohammed Ayoob, "Political Islam: Image and Reality," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 3 (2004), https://www.jstor.org/stable/40210231; Donald K. Emmerson, "Inclusive Islamism: The Utility Of Diversity," in *Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam*, ed. Richard C. Martin and Abbas Barzegar (Stanford University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804773355-004; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (Columbia University Press, 2004); John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin, *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*; Richard C Martin and Abbas Barzegar, "Introduction: The Debate about Islamism in the Public Sphere," in *Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam*, ed. Richard C. Martin and Abbas Barzegar (Stanford University Press, 2009); Ugur Komecoglu, "Islamism, Post-Islamism, and Civil Islam," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 16 (2014); Maidul Islam, *Limits of Islamism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), https://books.google.co.id/books?id=6qmwBgAAQBAJ.

31 To know more, see "The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State Group: The Long and Short Story," *BBC News*, March 23, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47210891; European Foundation for South Asian Studies, "The Rise of Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh," October, 2019, accessed February 8, 2024, https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/the-rise-of-political-islam-and-islamist-terrorism-in-bangladesh/.

32 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "The Resilience of Secularism in Bangladesh," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 15, no. 3 (2020): 257, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48630186.

33 Ala Uddin, *Bangladesh in 2022: Revisiting Ancestral Secularism and Promoting Religious Pluralism*, Comment 226 (South Asia Democratic Forum, 2022), 7; Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 1.

34 Alamgir Mohiuddin, "Revising Textbooks: Govt Dissolves Committee in Face of Flak," September 29, 2024, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/education/news/revising-textbooks-govt-dissolves-committee-face-flak-3714491; Special Correspondent, "Textbook Coordination Committee Dissolution draws Flak," *Prothom Alo*, September 30, 2014, accessed October 19, 2024, https://en.prothomalo.com/youth/education/3deow640d6; Tribune Desk, "Textbook Review and Revision Committee Dissolved," *Dhaka Tribune*, September 28, 2024, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/education/360037/textbook-revision-committee-dissolved; TBS Report, "Govt Dissolves Textbook Revision Committee," *The Business Standard*, September 28, 2024, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/education/govt-dissolves-textbook-revision-committee-952656.

highlights the persistent challenge of balancing secular ideals with the demands of religious groups, a conflict that has shaped much of Bangladesh's socio-political history.

More interestingly, there is a famous slogan of the secular-minded people in Bangladesh that adheres to a secular guiding phrase – "*Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār*" (One's religion is one's own, but festivals are for everyone) – highlighting individual religious beliefs while promoting communal celebrations. Sheikh Ḥasīna, the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, stated in 2014 that the government of Bangladesh will be governed by the values described in the "Medina Charter" to stress the state's secular principle. The Medina Charter (also known as the Constitution of Medina) was a 7th century document drafted by Prophet Muḥammad (phuh) after his migration (*Hijrah*) to Medina in 622 CE. It is considered one of the first written constitutions in the world and aimed to establish a framework for governance and coexistence in a multi-religious society. The Charter functioned as a pragmatic social contract that promoted peace, justice and cooperation among diverse communities.[35] Using this term indicates the persistent religious character that remains at the core of the political activities in Bangladesh, even when expressed through a secular lens.[36] She also believes fostering tolerance and cohabitation is the most effective approach to avoiding religious disputes. While theologically, Islamic law also promotes tolerance,[37] integrating the law into the modern nation state's framework is a challenge, if not impossible.[38] Thus, a secular state is a necessary framework to protect religious freedom within society.[39] According to Ḥasīna's government (Bangladesh AL), there is favourable disposition towards religious freedom and plurality.[40] Refusing the requests of Islamists for legislation on blasphemy, Ḥasīna stated that Bangladesh would adhere to a secular democracy as the prevailing system; the unfettered and equitable

35 The Medina Charter brought together several communities in Medina, including the Muslim immigrants (*Muhājirūn*), the local Muslim tribes (*Anṣār*) and Jewish tribes such as *Banū Qaynuqāʿ*, *Banū Naḍīr* and *Banū Qurayẓah*. It comprised 47 clauses that addressed mutual obligations, like collective defence, freedom of religion and resolution of disputes under Muhammad's leadership. The Charter declared that "the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs," recognising distinct faiths while uniting them under a common political community (*ummah*). Its primary goal was to ensure peaceful coexistence, social justice and collective security among diverse religious and tribal groups in Medina. For details, see Saïd Amir Arjomand, "The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad's Acts of Foundation of the Umma," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743809990067; Robert B. Serjeant, "The 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Islamic Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1964); Frederick M. Denny, "Ummah in the Constitution of Medina," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 36, no. 1 (1977), https://doi.org/10.1086/372530; Uri Rubin, "The 'Constitution of Medina' Some Notes," *Studia Islamica*, no. 62 (1985), https://doi.org/10.2307/1595521; Akram Ḍiyā' 'Umarī, *Madīnan Society at the Time of the Prophet: Its Characteristics and Organization* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991); Rasoul Namazi, "Islamic Political Thought and the 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Comparative Political Theory* 3, no. 2 (2023).

36 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 2–3.

37 For more, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction* (Simon and Schuster, 2008).

38 Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 38.

39 An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State*, 1–44.

40 Uddin, *Bangladesh in 2022*, 7.

practice of religion is an inherent and essential entitlement of every individual.[41] In an interview, she also said, "Bangladesh is a secular country; we cherish religious harmony."[42]

In a similar manner, in August 2024, Bangladesh's interim government, led by Nobel laureate Prof. Dr. Muḥammad Yūnus, reaffirmed the nation's commitment to fostering religious harmony. In a televised address, Yunus emphasised that "no individual would face discrimination on the basis of religion or political beliefs," underscoring the equal rights of religious minorities within what he termed the "new" Bangladesh.[43] This declaration followed the ousting of Sheikh Ḥasīna's government and rising concerns about communal tensions. Yunus also pledged that his government would safeguard the rights of all citizens, including those of minority faiths, in line with Bangladesh's long-standing secular principles.[44]

Consequently, Bangladesh is confronted with a dilemma over its identity as a secular nation or Islamic republic. In light of this, numerous secularist academics and political analysts raised the question of whether religious groups in Bangladesh are now able to function in governmental apparatuses, which were previously outlawed, or if the country is currently experiencing a "no-secular" age.[45] In light of the preceding, another political question may have arisen: is Bangladesh exhibiting indications of a society bereft of secularism or is it adopting a new kind of secularism? A vast body of literature delves into the historical and contemporary obstacles faced by secularism in Bangladesh, but this novel approach to secular values has not been exhaustively examined in previous literary works or academic research.

This study employs a qualitative method, including library research that analyses historical trajectories, legal developments, political instrumentalisation, constitutional amendments, party manifestos, public rhetoric, and media news and blogs. We also conducted interviews with 50 participants from diverse ideological backgrounds to elucidate the perspectives and debates surrounding the government and religious leaders on the issues of Islam and secularism

41 See Article 2A of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh: "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions." See also Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina rejects Blasphemy Law," *BBC News*, April 8, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22058462.

42 For the interview, see NDTV, "Bangladesh A Secular Country, We Cherish Religious Harmony: Sheikh Hasina," September 4, 2022, YouTube video, 0:03:57, https://youtu.be/rAsx2j510QI?si=kXVS8uSX51FpBBJC.

43 Kallol Bhattacherjee, "No One will be Discriminated on the Basis of their Religion in Bangladesh, Says Muhammad Yunus," *The Hindu*, August 25, 2024, https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/ahead-of-janmashtami-celebrations-prof-yunus-assures-no-one-will-be-discriminated-in-new-bangladesh-for-religious-identities-political-beliefs/article68566328.ece; Najmus Sm Sakib, "Bangladesh Transitional Government Head Calls for Unity, Vows to Ensure Rights of All Communities," *AA*, August 13, 2024, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-transitional-government-head-calls-for-unity-vows-to-ensure-rights-of-all-communities/3302518.

44 ET Online, "Bangladesh Interim Leader Muhammad Yunus Condemns 'Heinous' Attacks on Minorities, Calls on Youth for Protection," *The Economic Times*, August 10, 2024, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/bangladesh-interim-leader-muhammad-yunus-condemns-heinous-attacks-on-minorities-calls-on-youth-for-protection/articleshow/112429905.cms.

45 Ali Riaz, *The Troubled Democracy of Bangladesh: 'Muddling Through' or 'a Political Settlement'?*, Working Papers No. 7523 (Institute of South Asian Studies, 2015), https://ideas.repec.org//p/ess/wpaper/id7523.html; Mohammad Wahiduzzaman, "A Quest for Secular Bangladesh," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2016); Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 1–4.

as foundational principles of Bangladesh, particularly in relation to the secular guiding phrase, "*Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār.*"[46] We will show that the debates surrounding this slogan reveal how religious inclusivity is celebrated and contested in public life, reflecting deeper tensions between communal harmony and religious boundaries. We argue the relationship between religion and secularism is multifaceted in the country's context, where the secular principles of Bangladesh do not denote the elimination of religion. Religious actors have the freedom to express their faiths in the public sphere, even though, to some extent, undermining the secular principles of the state.

To explicate this argument, this article first presents a comprehensive analysis of the inherent connection between religion and secularism from a worldwide and overarching perspective. The purpose of this is to enable the reader to understand the complex correlation or interplay between religion and secularism in the context of Bangladesh. Then, we will show that, after Bangladesh's attainment of independence in 1971, this connection has adopted a paradoxical trajectory. This article reveals that the growing partnerships between the government and Islamist leaders have led to ambiguities and negotiations in implementing the secular principles of Bangladesh. The article concludes that the relationship between religion and secularism is not like a zero-sum game where both colour the socio-political context of Bangladeshi society.

THE MULTIFACETED NATURE OF SECULARISM: FROM HISTORICAL ORIGINS TO MODERN APPLICATIONS

The term secularism, initially used by the English philosopher George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, is derived from the Latin word "saecularis" or "saeculum," which denotes matters pertaining to the world and not to religious or spiritual matters.[47] During the 13th century, a clear differentiation was established between the terms "saecularis" and "saeculum" to denote entities and concepts in the universe that were autonomous and unaffected by the church's influence. Secularism, sometimes known as "laicism," is a term taken from the French that is

46 We conducted 50 semi-structured interviews through a mix of social media platforms and in-person meetings between November 2023 and September 2024. The participants were selected to reflect a broad ideological and religious spectrum, including five from the Ḥanafī tradition, five Salafīs, five practicing traditional Muslims without sectarian affiliations, five urban middle-class university students, five rural civic representatives, ten secular-minded individuals and ten non-Muslims. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of academic neutrality and anonymity. The interviews were conducted in Bengali, transcribed and analysed using thematic coding. Core questions focused on participants' views concerning the ongoing tensions between the state and religious leadership over Islam and secularism in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to the contested civic phrase *Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār* ("Religion belongs to its follower; festivals belong to all"). As responses began to converge around two distinct narratives, these were synthesised and presented in the section titled "Festival or Friction? The Political Paradox of the 'Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār."

47 *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, s.v. "secularism," accessed January 2, 2024, https://www.oed.com/; *Latin Dictionary*, online, s.v. "secularism," accessed January 2, 2024, https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/latin-english-dictionary.php?parola=secular; *Merriam-Webster*, online, s.v. "secularism," accessed January 2, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/.

used to denote the concept of secularism.[48] The term "laicism" etymologically derives from the French word "laicite," which denotes the notion of disentangling the state from religion.[49]

The idea of secularism traces its origins to the mediaeval theological idea of Christian civilisation in Europe, and it has evolved to encompass Christian and non-Christian societies in Europe and beyond.[50] In mediaeval Europe, religious and atheistic beliefs were distinguished by the secular, which Casanova describes as a central modern epistemic category.[51] During this time, there was a rise in alternative perspectives on the connection between human behaviour and the Divine, emphasising logic and reason. Furthermore, contemporary trends have aided individuals in understanding the secular concept, which deviates from traditional beliefs regarding religion and society. He further asserts that secularism is a worldview or how people understand their world and ideology or how people organise their society that has emerged alongside the progress of modernity and modernisation.[52] It can also be seen as a system of knowledge often unquestioningly accepted as the default framework of modern society or as an "unthought" assumption. He also suggests that contemporary secularism can be rooted in historical manifestations, shaped by different legal-constitutional division frameworks between the secular state and religion and distinct modes of cognitive distinction between science, philosophy and theology. In this contemporary context, Casanova offers a comprehensive examination of the current comprehension of secularism,[53] initially as a doctrine of statecraft and subsequently as an ideology with a broader reach.

According to Barry Kosmin of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, modern secularism can be categorised into two types: hard and soft. Kosmin argues that religious propositions lack epistemological legitimacy as they are not supported by reason or experience.[54] On the other hand, following soft secularists, the idea of achieving absolute truth was deemed impossible. As a result, they believed that scepticism and tolerance should be the primary values when discussing science and religion.[55]

Despite its widespread use, according to Taylor, there are three different forms of secularism; one notable aspect is the apparent dichotomy between religion or God and the public sphere, as seen in France's implementation of "*laicite*."[56] This policy prohibits the

48 Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 16 (Macmillan, 1987).
49 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 4.
50 Ibid.
51 José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms" (Oxford University Press, 2011), 67, https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/882v6/the-secular-secularizations-secularisms.
52 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11-39.
53 José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1049–66, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/527711.
54 Barry A. Kosmin, "Hard and Soft Secularists and Hard and Soft Secularism: An Intellectual and Research Challenge" (paper presented at the Session on the Study of Secularism and Irreligion, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Annual Conference, 2006), 19–21. For further understanding of Kosmin's arguments about secularism, see Barry Alexander Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *Secularism & Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives* (ISSSC, 2007).
55 Arshi Saleem Hashmi, *Bangladesh Ban on Religion Based Politics: Reviving the Secular Character of the Constitution* (Institute of Regional Studies, 2011), 22, https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1971325.
56 Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," *Secularism and its Critics* 32 (1998); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 421–536.

display of religious symbols in public schools and offices. Furthermore, this form primarily focuses on the decreasing prevalence of religious beliefs among the general population while also considering the potential for state support of religion. Consider the UK, for instance. While many individuals may not personally endorse religion or identify as non-religious, the state supports the Church of England. The third form delves into post-secular concepts. According to Hashmi, religion is just one of several options that can be considered for the state and public.[57] This implies that religion has not been eliminated from the public sphere; instead, it represents the perspective of numerous individuals. According to McConnell, the state should not view religion as a single voice but as a voice of many.[58]

These interpretations, as argued by Talal Asad,[59] when considered collectively, form a cohesive political doctrine. Similar to how political doctrines often arise, secularism has emerged as a response to what is seen as a deficiency or need to address an apparent flaw within an existing idea or system. In this case, religion is viewed as a form of inadequacy. It is essential to recognise that societal power dynamics influence every political doctrine. The discourse of secularism is influenced by imbalanced interactions with different forms of power—political, intellectual, cultural and moral. A compelling example of this is found in the interpretation of secularism by the Turkish Constitutional Court. In a landmark verdict issued on 16 January 1998, the court ordered the dissolution of the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) on the grounds that its Islamist orientation threatened the secular nature of the Turkish Republic. The ruling party emphasised that secularism extends beyond mere separation of religion and state—it entails the regulation and exclusion of religion from multiple spheres of life, including education, family, economy, law, manners and dress codes.[60] From this perspective, secularism functions as a far-reaching doctrine that governs not only political institutions but also shapes social and moral behaviours in the public domain. Saba Mahmood offers a comparable perspective by asserting that secular liberalism encompasses more than just a state doctrine or collection of judicial conventions.[61] Its profound implications essentially shape a way of life.[62]

In the context of Bangladesh, several scholars like Riaz and Ahmed have shown that the connections between religion and state are not simply a rigid divide but a functional relationship.[63] This functional relationship does not imply complete abandonment of

57 Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 106.

58 Michael W. McConnell, "Accommodation of Religion," *The Supreme Court Review* 1985 (1985): 1–59.

59 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 181–204.

60 The Turkish Constitutional Court, 16 January 1998, no. 1998/1. See also *Refah Partisi (The Welfare Party) and Others v. Turkey*, nos. 41340/98, 41342/98, 41343/98, and 41344/98, European Court of Human Rights (Grand Chamber), judgment 13 February 2003, https://www.refworld.org/jurisprudence/caselaw/echr/2001/en/20269; https://iilj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Refah-Partisi-v.-Turkey.pdf.

61 Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006); Michele Spanò, "Book Review: Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-691-14980-6," *Foucault Studies* 16 (2013).

62 Ali Riaz, "The Future of Secularism" (lecture delivered at the Independent University Bangladesh, June 15, 2015), 3.

63 Ali Riaz, "The Politics of Islamization in Bangladesh," in *Religion and Politics in South Asia*, ed. Ali Riaz (Routledge, 2010); Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh* (South Asian Publishers, 1990), 7–11.

secularism. Instead, it highlights the development of a unique form of secularism in India and Bangladesh that differs from the European understanding of secularism.[64]

A similar finding has also been found in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country, which maintains a delicate balance between religion and secularism through the state ideology of Pancasila. Religion plays a crucial role in Indonesian society, as evidenced by its inclusion in the first principle of Pancasila, which emphasises belief in a single deity while valuing civic pluralism.[65] Thus, Indonesia as a country is neither religious nor secular in the Western sense.[66] Jeremy Menchik describes the political culture of Indonesia with the concept of "Godly nationalism" where belief in God is seen as a civic virtue, and the state guides citizens toward proper faith and behaviour while the country is not based on a single religion.[67] In history, as in the case of Bangladesh, the government often found difficulties in negotiating the balance between secularism and religion following the socio-political dynamics of the country.[68]

THE PENDULUM OF SECULARISM IN BANGLADESHI GOVERNANCE

When it pertains to secularism, particularly its historical manifestations in South Asia, there is often a lack of comprehension regarding its development and implementation in the context of Bangladesh. In modern times, Bangladesh has been referred to as East Bengal during the British period from 1757 to 1947 and East Pakistan during the period of Pakistan from 1947 to 1971.[69] After a brutal nine-month war with Pakistan, Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971. Following the independence of Bangladesh, the AL government, led by *Bangabandhū* (friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujībur Raḥmān (also known as Sheikh Mujīb), assumed power as Prime Minister and later President (starting from 25 January 1975). This transition occurred shortly after the Pakistani forces surrendered on 16 December 1971.[70]

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64 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 5.

65 Michael Morfit, "Pancasila: The Indonesian State Ideology According to the New Order Government," *Asian Survey* 21, no. 8 (1981); Bhirawa Anoraga and Minako Sakai, "From Pemuda to Remaja: Millennials Reproducing Civic Nationalism in Post-New Order Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 51, no. 150 (2023). For further information, see Robert W. Hefner, *Islam and Citizenship in Indonesia: Democracy and the Quest for an Inclusive Public Ethics* (Taylor & Francis, 2023).

66 Zezen Zaenal Mutaqin, "The Strong State and Pancasila: Reflecting Human Rights in the Indonesian Democracy," *Constitutional Review* 2 (2016): 159, https://heinonline.org/hol-cgi-bin/get_pdf.cgi?handle=hein.journals/consrev2&section=19.

67 Jeremy Menchik, "Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 3 (2014), accessed May 31, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417514000267. See also Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 65–92.

68 Hashmi, *Bangladesh Ban on Religion Based Politics*, 23.

69 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 6; Md Ferdows Hossen, "Constitutional Chaos in Bangladesh: A Journey from Secularism to Islamism," *South Asian Law Review Journal* 8 (2022). For more detail, see Riaz, "More Than Meets the Eye."

70 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 6; Shah Alam, "The State-Religion Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh: A Critique," *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee/Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 24, no. 2 (1991); Jahid Hossain Bhuiyan, "Secularism in the Constitution of Bangladesh," *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 49, no. 2 (2017).

The first constitution of Bangladesh was established after the *Gana Parishad*, or People's Council, approved the Constitution Bill on 4 November 1972.[71] It was subsequently implemented on 16 December 1972, which coincided with Bangladesh's first triumph day. Clause 1, Article 8 of the constitution states that the guiding principles of the People's Republic of Bangladesh are "Democracy, Socialism, Secularism, and Bengali Nationalism."[72] Article 12 provides a clear definition of secularism: The principle of secularism is achieved by eradicating any form of:

a. communalism.
b. the act of conferring political status upon any religion by the state.
c. the manipulation of religion for political gain.
d. the act of discriminating against or persecuting individuals based on their religious beliefs.[73]

The constitution of Bangladesh ensures that all citizens of the state have the freedom to practice their religion. In accordance with Article 28, the state is prohibited from discriminating against any citizen based on factors such as religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.[74] Article 41(1) mandates, "subject to any law, public order, and morality;"[75]

a. Everyone is entitled to freely express, engage in, or promote religious beliefs.
b. Every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain, and manage its religious institutions.[76]

According to Article 41(2), individuals attending educational institutions are not obligated to participate in religious instructions, ceremonies or worship associated with a religion different from their own.[77]

As per the 1972 constitution of the AL government, which emphasised secularism, political parties with Islamic affiliations were banned because of their alleged support for Pakistan during the War of Independence. On the contrary, politically motivated actions influenced by religious beliefs from political and nonpolitical groups opposing the AL persisted quietly until 1979. Their involvement in national politics increased significantly after 1979. The Pakistani political elites seemed to focus more on Islamophobia and religious nationalism while overlooking East Pakistan's fight for secular nationalism, social justice, regional autonomy and democracy.[78] This posed a significant challenge for the government as well. By making this

71 Dina M. Siddiqi, "Secular Quests, National Others: Revisiting Bangladesh's Constituent Assembly Debates," in *Ghosts from the Past?*, ed. Neeti Nair, Michael Kugelman and Bijan Omrani (Routledge, 2021).

72 *Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, 4; Md Didarul Islam and Fazrin Huda, "Religion and Politics: Bangladesh Perspective," *International Journal of Management and Humanities* 2, no. 4 (2016): 2. To know more, see Riaz, "The Politics of Islamization in Bangladesh," 45–70.

73 *Bangladesh Constitution*, 4; Islam and Huda, "Religion and Politics," 2.

74 Ibid., 8; Salehin, "Democracy and Islam," 95–96.

75 Islam and Huda, "Religion and Politics," 2.

76 Ibid.; *Bangladesh Constitution*, 12.

77 Ibid. For details, see Hossen, "Constitutional Chaos in Bangladesh"; Bhuiyan, "Secularism in the Constitution of Bangladesh"; Alam, "The State-Religion Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh"; Hashmi, "Bangladesh Ban on Religion Based Politics."

78 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 6–7.

decision, the government had to combat the propaganda spread by these parties. These parties were constantly vigilant in exploiting privileges through this propaganda. A significant concern arose from the opposition of political parties with religious affiliations towards the Liberation War. *Jamʿāt-e-Islamī* Bangladesh (JI),[79] *Niẓām-e-Islamī* (NI),[80] Pakistan Democratic Party[81] and the Muslim League[82] have been barred from participating in political activities. There is common misunderstanding that these four parties were banned solely because of their religious basis.[83]

As a result, after the AL started to decline, the vision of secularism outlined in the Constitution of 1972 came to an end due to a military coup in 1975, which occurred after the assassination of Mujīb. Amid the political crisis, Major-General Ziaur Rahmān, commonly known as Major Zia, emerged as a prominent political leader and held onto his position of authority until early 1981. In 1978, Zia established the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The BNP is a political party that follows an ideology generally seen as "right-of-centre." In the realm of political science, the term "right-of-centre" typically refers to ideologies or parties that are moderately conservative, advocating for traditional values, national identity, market-orientated economic policies and generally restrained government intervention while not aligning with extreme far-right or authoritarian positions.[84] Ali Riaz uses this term by saying the BNP's political philosophy is mostly right-of-centre, influenced by a combination of nationalism, cultural conservatism and a pro-Islamic identity in opposition to the AL's secular Bengali nationalism.[85]

The BNP espouses a stance that combines a sense of national pride with a commitment to traditional values while emphasising advancing the interests of corporations. Furthermore, it maintains a firm stance on India while also embracing a blend of moderate Islam and traditional Bengali culture. After the government took control, Zia's administration began a process of "Islamisation" that received state support and had a significant impact on the culture and society of Bangladesh.[86] He removed the ban on religious political parties, allowed the return and reconstitution of Islamist groups such as Jamʿāt-e-Islamī (JI), and promoted Islamic symbols and practices at the state level. He replaced the secular "Bengali nationalism" with

79 It is the largest Islamist political party in Bangladesh

80 It was one of the four political parties belonging to the United Front alliance, which defeated the Muslim League in the 1954 elections.

81 It was established in Pakistan by Nawwābzāda Naṣrullāh Khān in June 1967.

82 It was the original successor of the All-India Muslim League, which played a pivotal role in the Pakistan Movement, ultimately leading to the establishment of an independent nation.

83 Abul Quashem Fazlul Haq, *Dharmabhittik Rajneeti O Rajneetite Dharmer Opobyabohar* [Religion-Based Politics and the Misuse of Religion in Politics], Best Essays (Kathaprakash Publications, 2013), 182.

84 For more, see Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

85 Ali Riaz, "'God Willing': The Politics and Ideology of Islamism in Bangladesh," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1 (2003).

86 For more about Zia's process of "Islamisation," see Shamsul I. Khan, S. Aminul Islam, and M. Imdadul Haque, *Political Culture, Political Parties and the Democratic Transition in Bangladesh* (Academic Publishers, 1996), https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130282271429297152.

"Bangladeshi nationalism," emphasising the nation's Muslim identity, and dropped secularism as a constitutional principle.[87]

Instead of secularism, which was one of the four guiding principles of the Constitution, General Zia substituted it with "Absolute Trust and Faith in the Almighty Allāh [God]." Incorporated into the Constitution's preamble was the phrase "*Bismi Allāh-al-Rahmān-al-Rahīm*" (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful). It was published in the *Extraordinary Gazette of Bangladesh* on 23 April 1977, in accordance with the Proclamations (Amendment) Order, 1977. On 4 May 1976, Zia's Proclamation Order III made a significant change by removing Article 38 of the Constitution. This article had previously prohibited the formation of political parties or groupings that were based on religious convictions.[88] There has been a shift in emphasis within the Constitution, which now allows religiously motivated political groups to participate in the electoral arena, altering the previous focus on secularism. Since the country's independence, there has been a ban on this practice due to JI's controversial involvement in the Liberation War and its support of the Pakistani military. These changes contributed to the decline of secular nationalism as a political philosophy.[89]

In 1977, the government under Zia's leadership established the Syllabi Committee, which declared Islam a "code of conduct of life." In 1978, the government took a significant step by founding the Madrasa Education Board. This initiative opened new opportunities for students from madrasas to pursue higher education at universities. Furthermore, a new ministry called the "Ministry of Religious Affairs" was formed by the government, alongside the declaration of Prophet Muḥammad's (pbuh) birthday (*Mīlād al-Nabī*) as a national holiday.[90] In addition, Zia incorporated Article 25(2) into the Constitution, emphasising the state's commitment to foster strong and harmonious relationships among Muslim nations, rooted in Islamic solidarity. Zia played a significant role in introducing this clause. Following the passing of the Fifth Amendment on 6 April 1979, any government proclamation orders issued between 15 August 1975 and 6 April 1979 were deemed valid.[91]

After Zia's assassination in 1981, General Ḥussain Muḥammad Ershād, also known as President Ershād, came to power in another military *coup d'état*. Under his leadership, the process of state-sponsored Islamisation persisted. When Ershād made the decision in 1988 to declare Islam as the country's official religion, it was with the intention of bolstering his administration's grip on power for the foreseeable future. Members of President Ershād's government frequently visited houses of worship, including mosques, *mazārs* (tombs) and *pirs*

87 Md Ashraf Aziz Ishrak Fahim, "Inventing Islam(ism): De-Islamization Under Secular Authoritarianism in Bangladesh," *ReOrient* 7, no. 2 (2022), https://www.jstor.org/stable/48706617.

88 Mubashar Hasan, "Democracy and Political Islam in Bangladesh," *South Asia Research* 31, no. 2 (2011).

89 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 6–7.

90 Islam and Huda, "Religion and Politics," 3. For further information, see Ali Riaz, *Inconvenient Truths about Bangladeshi Politics* (Prothoma Prokashan, 2013).

91 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 6–7. For details, see Alam, "The State-Religion Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh," 209–25; Bhuiyan, "Secularism in the Constitution of Bangladesh," 204–27; Muhammad Rezaur Rahman, "Secularism and Islam as the State Religion: Conflict or Coexistence?," in *A History of the Constitution of Bangladesh*, ed. Ridwanul Hoque and Rokeya Chowdhury (Routledge, 2024).

(Muslim saints), to convey significant announcements to gatherings of religious scholars and followers. Ershād's relentless push for Islamisation in Bangladesh was criticised as a strategic move to cultivate alliances with Islamic nations and legitimise his authoritarian regime.[92] State-sponsored Islamisation seems to have been used as a means to attract Muslim voters and garner international support, especially from countries with a majority Muslim population.[93]

President Ershād had a strong vision of Islamisation in Bangladesh, which he considered to be the driving force behind his unwavering commitment. In 1988, the Eighth Amendment bill was approved, recognising Islam as the "state religion." Consequently, the prevailing secular ethos in Bangladesh was significantly influenced. Bangladesh was founded as a secular state at its inception, with secularism being one of the four guiding principles outlined in its first Constitution.[94]

It was intriguing when the AL, BNP and Leftists organised a strike opposing the Eighth Amendment , while JI chose not to participate. At the outset, they abstained from expressing their support for Ershād's decision but declined to engage in forceful opposition to it. Notwithstanding President Ershād's endeavours to foster favourable associations with well-established political organisations, the resistance against him grew more vehement. The BNP and AL were instrumental in promoting and propelling this movement. Through collaboration with like-minded political groups, they successfully synchronised their efforts. President Ershād's resignation in 1990 was a result of coercion, which ultimately facilitated the progress of democracy.[95]

The 1991 general election marked a significant milestone in the advancement of democratic ideals. This election exemplifies the deliberate utilisation of religious emblems and symbols for political advantage. To generate popular backing, several political parties in Bangladesh, including the AL, BNP and JI, leveraged religious rhetoric as a strategic component of their campaign discourse. The BNP made a clear and unequivocal pledge during its election campaign to remove the passage "*Bismi Allāh-al-Rahmān-al-Rahīm*" from the Constitution in the case that the AL was to secure victory. Sheikh Ḥasīna promptly denied these claims, stating she did not have any opposing views on "*Bismi Allāh*." The political party posters and slogans were thought-provoking and fascinating. The campaign slogan used by BNP members was "*Lā ʾIlāha illa Allāh, dhaner shishe Bismi Allāh*." The precise translation of the phrase is "Vote for the symbol of the paddy sheaf, assuming that God is merciful." In the same way, the AL used to sing the phrase "*Lā ʾIlāha illa Allāh, nawkar mālik tui Allāh*," which means "There is no God but Allah; the boat belongs to Allah." Members of the AL were actively involved in this activity. Similarly, supporters of JI commonly used the slogan "*Vote dile pallay, khushi hobe Allāh*." This phrase means "If you vote for scale, it would bring Allāh's pleasure."[96]

92 Hossen, "Constitutional Chaos in Bangladesh," 105–6.
93 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 7.
94 Islam and Huda, "Religion and Politics," 3–4; Hossen, "Constitutional Chaos in Bangladesh," 106. For detailed information, see Riaz, "The Politics of Islamization in Bangladesh," 45–70.
95 Islam and Huda, "Religion and Politics," 4.
96 Ibid.

Between 1991 and 2007, two secular political groups in Bangladesh, the AL and BNP, established strategic partnerships with the Islamist JI. The two main parties sought assistance from JI to set up a government or bolster political movements aimed at overthrowing the existing dictatorship. In 1991, the BNP sought legislative support to govern and formed an alliance with the JI. Unfortunately, this partnership was short-lived and the AL eventually sought support from the JI to bring down the BNP government. In 1998, the JI once again became a part of the BNP and played a role in the coalition that assumed power in 2001. The alliances in Bangladesh were driven by political expediency and recognition of Islam's increasing significance among Muslim voters, even though there were ideological differences between the BNP and JI (Bangladeshi nationalism vs. Islamism).[97]

THE SECULAR-ISLAMIST DILEMMA

From 2009 to 2017, the AL alliance government in Bangladesh faced the task of balancing its commitment to secularism with the need to accommodate Islamist groups. Despite secularism being a core principle of the state, the government has made significant concessions under pressure from Islamist groups. In 2013, the political landscape of Bangladesh was greatly influenced by the Shahbagh movement.[98] This movement, a secular protest, advocated for the punishment of the individuals responsible for the 1971 genocide. This movement resulted in a confrontation with Ḥifāzat-e-Islām Bangladesh, an Islamist group that condemned the movement and its supporters as atheists[99] and anti-Islamists,[100] due to the criticism of Islamic practices by some bloggers associated with Shahbagh.[101]

As a result, the country witnessed a notable divide, with secularists and Islamists making strides in the political arena.[102] The former government of the AL, known for its dedication to secular principles, added to the complexity of the situation by establishing connections with the leaders of Ḥifāzat-e-Islām. This led to a feeling of betrayal among its secular supporters. In 2016, a significant escalation occurred when Ḥifāzat-e-Islām made threats of violence in

97 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 7–8; Chowdhury, *From 'Secular' to 'Islamo-Secular' Bangladesh*.

98 Shahbagh is a famous place in the capital city Dhaka, Bangladesh.

99 Toufique Imrose Khalidi, "Behind the Rise of Bangladesh's Hifazat," Al Jazeera, May 9, 2013, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/5/9/behind-the-rise-of-bangladeshs-hifazat; Azizur Rahman, "Islamists March," *DW*, April 5, 2013, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-tense-ahead-of-islamist-march/a-16723915; The Listening Post, "Bangladesh's 'Blasphemy' Divide," Al Jazeera, May 13, 2013, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-listening-post/2013/5/13/bangladeshs-blasphemy-divide.

100 Xinhua, "Bangladeshi Islamists Rally to Demand Action against Atheist Bloggers," *Global Times*, April 7, 2013, accessed January 9, 2024, https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/773004.shtml; Rahman, "Islamists March"; The Listening Post, "Bangladesh's 'Blasphemy' Divide."

101 Helal Mohammed Khan, "Uprising's Dialectic Pedagogy: Gramsci, Scott and Mandela against the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam Movement in Bangladesh," *Politikon: IAPSS Journal of Political Science* 36 (2018), https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.36.5; Muhammad Abdur Raqib, "'Safeguarding Islam' in Modern Times: Politics, Piety and Hefazat-e-Islami ʿUlamā in Bangladesh," *Critical Research on Religion* 8, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303220952869.

102 Maidul Islam, "Political Islam in Bangladesh: From Faraidi Movement to Hefajat-i-Islam," *Journal of the Department of Sociology of North Bengal University* 2, no. 1 (2015).

response to the potential removal of Islam as the state religion by the Supreme Court. The AL government's passive response and subsequent distancing from the Shahbagh movement left many observers and commentators perplexed.[103]

These compromises include altering the secular content in educational textbooks and removing a sculpture from the Supreme Court premises, as it was deemed incompatible with Islamic values. These actions indicate a calculated approach by the AL to reconcile secular policies with the demands of Islamist forces, even though the latter have little widespread support among the public or prominent figures. Traditional religious and cultural practices persisted during this time, remaining unaffected by political shifts. Some critics claim the AL's approach deviates from its original objective of separating religion from state politics after independence without fully embracing Western secularisation approaches.[104]

In January 2017, secular intellectuals in Bangladesh raised concerns regarding the government's decision to revise primary and secondary school textbooks. It was alleged that Islamic groups, particularly Ḥifāzat-e-Islām Bangladesh, influenced this decision. Some critics raised concerns about the exclusion of works by secular and minority religious writers, including former university professor Humayun Azād, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Ṣūfī follower Lālon Shāh and historian Satyen Sen. This action sparked a lively discussion about the government's intentions and caused concern among intellectuals who saw it as a potential move towards religious conservatism and an alliance with fundamentalist groups. The conflict was reported extensively in domestic and foreign media outlets, with emphasis on how religious groups were involved in the editing process and how these alterations may promote communalism and religious politics.[105] For others, the government's seeming capitulation to community politics and abandonment of secularist principles was signalled by the textbook revisions.[106]

Prominent individuals expressed their vehement opposition to the modifications made to the textbook and faced editorial censure for what some perceived as the endorsement of outdated perspectives that might hinder children's cultural growth and foster societal divisiveness. Observers who were knowledgeable about the situation perceived these modifications as a capitulation to fundamentalists, contradicting the administration's professed commitment to secularism. The books used in *madrasa* education, which refers to Islamic schooling, were altered by eliminating George Harrison's image and incorporating additional orthodox Islamic

103 Anupam D. Roy, *Stealing Shahbag: A Re-Legitimization of Islamism in the Aftermath of a Secularist Social Movement*, Bangladesh Development Research Working Paper Series 34 (Bangladesh Development Research Center, 2018), https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.3116349.

104 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 8; Uddin, "Bangladesh in 2022," 6–7; Hashmi, "Bangladesh Ban on Religion Based Politics," 1–5.

105 Staff Correspondent, "Republish Textbooks with Progressive Write-Ups," *The Daily Star*, January 12, 2017, accessed January 8, 2024, https://www.thedailystar.net/city/republish-textbooks-progressive-write-ups-1343995.

106 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 9.

illustrations.[107] The prevailing AL strategy adjustment toward elevating religion in state policy was seen by many as reflected in these developments. After 2008, they shifted their political strategy away from secularism, which some think contributed to their return to power.[108] This policy shift in education, based on Lorch's analysis, was not just a symbolic or top-down political move; it had material consequences. Over time, curriculum changes influence how children see themselves, their neighbours and their place in society. When diversity is erased from education, it risks creating social distance, intolerance and communal tension, especially in future generations. Therefore, rather than being a mere political storm, this policy shift functioned as a soft transformation of societal values, influencing the institutional logic of education, the socialisation of youths and the identity politics embedded in everyday life.[109]

In May 2017, the AL alliance government decided to remove a statue from the grounds of the Supreme Court.[110] This step was implemented in response to a reprimand from Islamist organisations, specifically Ḥifāzat-e-Islām, who perceived the sculpture as symbolic of idolatry.[111] The Prime Minister, Sheikh Ḥasīna, encountered opposition to the monument due to her aversion to the clothing of the "Greek deity Themis," who was represented wearing a sari. She commented that it deviated from Greek tradition. This decision incited significant controversy and accusations that the government was yielding to the demands of Islamist organisations, resulting in public condemnation and internal disagreement within the administration. Asaduzzamān Nūr, the former Minister of Cultural Affairs, expressed his dissatisfaction with the decision, viewing it as a departure from the secular ideals that form the foundation of the People's Republic.

In contrast, the leaders of Ḥifāzat-e-Islām defended the removal by stating it was a tactic to bring the nation together and enhance overall prosperity. After the removal, Islamists organised processions to express their gratitude and continued to demand the removal of all sculptures in Bangladesh. Simultaneously, a demonstration opposing the removal of the statue encountered police intervention, resulting in the use of tear gas and water cannons. This led to injuries among the participants and further fuelled criticism of the government for succumbing to religious hardliners.[112]

Similarly, following the downfall of Sheikh Ḥasīna's government on 5 August 2024, a series of events led to the vandalism of statues, including those of her father, Sheikh Mujībur Raḥmān. Conservative Islamist groups asserted that these statues embodied idolatry and went against

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107 Amena A. Mohsin, "Religion, Politics and Security: The Case of Bangladesh," in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, ed. Satu P. Limaye, Robert G. Wirsing and Mohan Malik (Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004).

108 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 9–10. For more information, see Jasmin Lorch, "Islamization by Secular Ruling Parties: The Case of Bangladesh," *Politics and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048318000573.

109 Lorch, "Islamization by Secular Ruling Parties."

110 "Lady Justice Statue Removed in Bangladesh after Islamist Outcry," UCA News, May 26, 2017, accessed January 8, 2024, https://www.ucanews.com/news/lady-justice-statue-removed-in-bangladesh-after-islamist-outcry/79343.

111 "Bangladesh Muslims Protest against Justice Goddess Statue," *BBC News*, February 24, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39082395.

112 Wohab, "'Secularism' or 'No-Secularism'?," 10–11.

Islamic principles. These episodes of vandalism provoked intense protests across the country. Many saw the attacks on these symbols as a derogation to Bangladesh's foundational heritage and its secular principles. Conversely, others saw the removal of the statues as a valid manifestation of religious conviction, consistent with their understanding of Islamic doctrine. The interim government, although striving to address these conflicts, faced criticism for failing to avert the damage and support from those who saw the actions as emblematic of the nation's religious character.[113] These events reflect not only the relentless pursuit of balance between convictions and national symbols but also indicate that debates on secularism and religious conservatism are still vibrant in Bangladeshi socio-politics.

In response to ongoing challenges, the interim government implemented several initiatives in mid-September 2024. One of these initiatives was the formation of a 10-member committee under the National Curriculum and Textbook Board of Bangladesh to evaluate and amend the national school and college textbooks. It included notable progressive secular figures such as Dr. Samina Luthfa, a professor in the Department of Sociology, and Dr. Kamrul Ḥasan Mamūn, a professor in the Department of Physics at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Nevertheless, soon thereafter, criticism emerged from conservative religious groups. Luthfa and Kamrul faced criticism for their purported pro-secular and anti-Islamic perspectives; however, the severe backlash was mostly directed at Luthfa's action in openly endorsing LGBTQ+ rights. Islamist organisations, such as Islami Andolan Bangladesh and Ḥifāzat-e-Islām, demanded the exclusion of such controversial figures and inclusion of few Islamic experts to ensure balanced representation as they consider such kinds of initiatives as a potential risk to violate Islamic values and ideals. The government, having operated under pressure, dismissed the committee on 28 September 2024.[114]

While the government never explicitly stated an ideological agenda, the inclusion of well-known progressive secular academics in such a high-stakes educational review panel signals a probable intent to promote a more inclusive, pluralistic curriculum. This situation raises concerns among conservative Islamic groups as they consider such initiatives a potential risk to violate Islamic values and ideals. This vignette has again raised the challenge of balancing secular governance against the demands of conservative religious groups, a conflict that shaped much of Bangladesh's sociopolitical history.

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113 For more about the vandalism of statues, see Ido Vock and Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Euphoria in Bangladesh after PM Sheikh Hasina Flees Country," *BBC News*, August 6, 2024, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clywww69p2vo; Web Desk, "VIDEO: Sheikh Mujib's Statue in Dhaka Vandalised after Fall of Hasina's Govt," *The News*, August 5, 2024, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1216910-sheikh-mujibs-statue-in-dhaka-vandalised-after-fall-of-hasinas-govt; C. Uday Bhaskar, "Opinion | Sheikh Hasina's Fall in Bangladesh Shows History's Cruel Irony," *South China Morning Post*, August 7, 2024, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.scmp.com/opinion/asia-opinion/article/3273562/sheikh-hasinas-fall-bangladesh-shows-historys-cruel-irony; Jannatul Naym Pieal, "Why Are the Cultural Symbols Being Attacked?" *The Business Standard*, August 10, 2014, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/why-are-cultural-symbols-being-attacked-913221.

114 Mohiuddin, "Revising Textbooks"; TBS Report, "Govt Dissolves Textbook Revision Committee"; Tribune Desk, "Textbook Review and Revision Committee Dissolved"; Special Correspondent, "Textbook Coordination Committee Dissolution draws Flak."

FESTIVAL OR FRICTION? THE POLITICAL PARADOX OF "*DHARMA JĀR JĀR, UTSHOB SHOBĀR*"

"*Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār*" (One's religion is one's own, but festivals are for everyone) is a well-recognised slogan embraced by Bengalis residing in various locations, such as Bangladesh, West Bengal and Tripura. The term is often used during religious holidays to draw attention to its all-encompassing nature. This phrase is mainly used during the Durgā Puja festivities,[115] which commemorate the triumph of the warrior Goddess Durgā over the monster Mahishasura, symbolising the celebration of the Mother Goddess in Hindu culture. The celebration symbolises the manifestation of feminine energy, known as '*Shakti*,' in the cosmic realm. The celebration signifies the prevailing of righteousness over wickedness.[116]

On the one hand, this is one of the famous slogans of the former government, the Bangladesh AL and the secular-minded people in Bangladesh. Several AL leaders also vocalised this phrase when attending Hindus' *puja mandaps*, or festivals, as a demonstration of unity. However, Islamic scholars strongly disagree with this phrase. As to the late Khondokar ʿAbdullāh Jahangīr, a former professor of *ḥadīth* and Islamic studies at Kushtia Islamic University in Bangladesh, the act of believing or engaging in this would result in loss of faith (ʾ*imān*):

> In a democratic society, it is the government's responsibility to provide opportunities and guarantee safety when any opposition party organises a political rally. Nevertheless, is it necessary to engage in the events orchestrated by the opposition political party or partake in their celebrations? No, definitely not. If a person attends a festival related to a 'political religion' that contradicts their own 'political religion' out of political open-mindedness, and as a result, their 'political faith' is compromised, the question arises—in reality, if someone were to take part in a religious ceremony that goes against their 'religion of the hereafter,' would there be any erosion of faith? Indeed, it will. It is crucial to perceive that 'political religion' is an item of human invention, but 'religion of the hereafter' is a divine bestowment. The importance of the afterlife in religion exceeds that of religion's temporal and political aspects.[117]

Furthermore, the late Mawlānā Nūr Ḥusain Qāsemī, the ex-Secretary General of Jāmiʿat ʿUlama-e Islām Bangladesh (an Islamist political party) and President of Dhaka Metropolitan Ḥifāzat-e-Islām, who was affiliated with the BNP-led coalition, argued that the phrase *Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār* is deemed to contradict Islamic principles. In Bangladesh, a mostly Muslim country, individuals of different religious affiliations are afforded equal civil rights, as well as access to many social programs and security. The state will enact suitable remedies for this. However, at this point, Muslims do not have the opportunity to actively integrate their religious views with those of other faiths.[118]

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115 The celebration of *Durga Pooja* (idolatry) for Hindus holds great significance in India and Bangladesh.

116 Abul Hassan Muhammad Abdullah, "One Religion's Festival is not for Another Religion," Mashik al-Kawsar, translated from Bengali, accessed October 17, 2024, https://www.alkawsar.com/bn/article/1696/.

117 "Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār" [One's Religion is one's Own, but Festivals are for Everyone], *Daily Nayadiganta*, October 15, 2021, https://archive.enayadiganta.com/?archive=15-10-2021.

118 Bangla Tribune Report, "Saying 'Every Religion has its own Festival' is Against Islam: Jamiat," *Bangla Tribune*, October 16, 2018, translated from Bengali, https://www.banglatribune.com/politics/375791/.

Qāsemī also pointed out that cow slaughter and consumption of beef are prohibited according to the Hindu *Shastra* (religion); however, they are not prohibited in Islam. Nevertheless, in mostly secular India, the legitimate religious privileges of Muslims are unjustly denied. Islam categorically forbids the veneration of idols, but Hinduism regards it as a kind of reverence and morally commendable act. Yet, Muslims have never made demands or voiced dissatisfaction about Hindus engaging in idol worship, a practice that is forbidden in Islam nor do they see it as logical. Later, he emphasises, "it is necessary for all to remember that Eid or *Puja* is not a national and social ritual; it is absolutely a religious festival. It is desirable for every religious person to have a sense of individuality in any religious festival."[119]

The opinions of the broader public echo the ambiguity of the implementation of the slogan, *Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār*. After thorough analysis of public perceptions of religious leaders in Bangladesh, we also interviewed 50 individuals from diverse ideological backgrounds to explore their perspectives on this secular slogan. We identified two rationales for this slogan:[120]

1. One perspective argues that religious festivals should remain the exclusive domain of their respective faith communities. According to this viewpoint, if an individual adheres to a religion, it is natural for them to assume ownership of the associated festivals. The logic is that these celebrations are inherently tied to specific theological and cultural values, which only the followers of that religion can fully understand and honour. Consequently, the commemoration of religious events by members of other faiths may be seen as inappropriate or even disruptive, as it could dilute the occasion's religious significance. Additionally, this faction asserts that when individuals from different religious backgrounds participate in another group's religious observances, it may inadvertently create tensions or conflicts within their community, potentially undermining the integrity of their religious identity. This interpretation is grounded in the belief that religious rituals and ceremonies are sacred and should remain insulated from external influences.
2. Conversely, an alternative and more secular perspective posits that religious belief is a private and subjective matter, and one's participation in celebrations of diverse religious traditions does not necessarily compromise personal faith. From this standpoint, attending a religious event from another faith—whether by joining a friend for a meal or observing a cultural practice—can be done while maintaining one's religious convictions. This view suggests that participation in religious festivals can be seen as an act of social inclusion and cultural appreciation rather than religious transgression. It emphasises the individual's intention, suggesting that one's participation does not imply endorsement of another religion's theological underpinnings but an acknowledgement of shared humanity and respect for pluralism. Furthermore, advocates of this perspective argue that interfaith participation fosters mutual understanding and coexistence, promoting civic harmony in a religiously diverse

119 Ibid.
120 Sourced from the participant interviews, analysis of *Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār* and social media.

society. By embracing the celebrations of others, individuals can affirm the value of religious diversity without necessarily compromising their beliefs.

However, the tension between the two perspectives reveals a deeper paradox in the interpretation of the phrase *Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār* within the public sphere. On one hand, the slogan suggests a pluralistic and inclusive vision of religious coexistence, where the boundaries between religious and communal identities are fluid and participation in religious festivals transcends theological divides. On the other hand, the slogan is contested by those who see it as potentially eroding the distinctiveness of religious traditions and blurring the lines of communal belonging. The resulting debates highlight the complex negotiation between religious exclusivity and social integration in a multi-religious society. As both factions remain steadfast in their views, the discourse surrounding this slogan becomes a reflection of broader societal concerns about the balance between religious identity, communal harmony and secular governance in Bangladesh.

Moreover, this paradox demonstrates the ongoing struggle to reconcile religious and secular values within a national framework, where the protection of religious identity and promotion of social cohesion are seen as essential. In this sense, the phrase *Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār* serves as a focal point for discussions about the role of religion in public life, raising critical questions about how religious diversity should be managed in a secular, yet deeply religious, state. These debates are indicative of the broader socio-political dynamics that shape the interplay between religion, state and society, offering valuable insights into the negotiation of secularism in contemporary Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

The interplay between secularism and Islamisation in Bangladesh reveals a complex and evolving relationship that has shaped the country's political and social landscape since its independence in 1971. This study has shown that the relationship between religion and secularism is multifaceted in the country's context, where Bangladesh's secular principles do not denote the elimination of religion. Religious actors have the freedom to express their faiths in the public sphere, even though, to some extent, they undermine the state's secular principles.

By analysing key events, such as the revision of school curricula by the former AL government, the removal of statues, and the formation and subsequent dissolution of a 10-member committee by the interim government to revise textbooks due to the religious pressure and vandalism of statues after the downfall of the AL, this study demonstrates how the government frequently compromises on secular principles to maintain political stability and accommodate the demands of Islamist groups like Ḥifāzat-e-Islām. These compromises reflect a broader trend of pragmatically adjusting secularism in response to religious pressures. This balancing act between secular governance and religious accommodation raises critical questions about the authenticity of Bangladesh's secular identity and whether the country is gradually moving toward a more religion-centric model of governance.

The debates surrounding the slogan *Dharma Jār Jār, Utshob Shobār* further highlight the inherent tension between religious exclusivity and social inclusivity. As demonstrated, while some factions argue for a more insular approach to religious festivals, others advocate for interfaith participation as a means of fostering civic harmony and mutual respect. These divergent perspectives underscore the broader societal and political dilemmas that Bangladesh faces in managing religious diversity within a secular framework.

All in all, the case of Bangladesh shows that secularism and religion are not always a zero-sum game. Instead, they are often engaged in ongoing negotiation. As scholars argue, secular and religious spheres are relational and fluid, shaped by historical and cultural contexts rather than fixed categories.[121] This means that secular governance frequently involves accommodating religious practices and values while maintaining political pluralism, creating a dynamic balance rather than a strict separation. In Bangladesh, this negotiation is evident in how secularism coexists with Islam as the state religion, reflecting a continuous process of balancing religious identity with secular democratic principles.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of secularism by illustrating how secular principles can be pragmatically reconfigured in Muslim-majority contexts, where the tension between religious conservatism and state governance is particularly acute. It offers insights into the malleability of secularism in navigating complex socio-political landscapes, where the interaction between secular and religious forces continues to shape governance and national identity. As Bangladesh moves forward, its ability to reconcile secular governance with the rising influence of religious conservatism will play a crucial role in determining the trajectory of its political and societal development. Policymakers and civil society should engage in ongoing dialogue to find a balance that respects religious values and ideals while safeguarding the secular principles that are essential for democratic governance and social cohesion.

[121] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 1–20; John R. Bowen, "Secularism: Conceptual Genealogy or Political Dilemma?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 3 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417510000356; Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 91–102.

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