

Religion and Politics: Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract: *Political use of religion is a common feature in Indian subcontinent from the very time of the advent of the Aryans. They used religion as a political weapon and their seed has become like a Banyan tree. And that's why still today, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India all are suffering due to religion based politics. It is considered as the most important element of communalism. But in Bangladesh communalism was not acute in ancient period. During the last phase of the British period and more especially in Pakistan period, religion became the most powerful weapon for the ruling class. The birth of Muslim League and the technical transformation of Congress tenderness towards Hindus during British period were based on religion. The Pakistani rulers tried to use religion as the handmaiden of oppression. So, being aware of the devastating fact of the use of religion in politics, the then Awami League had to take decision considering a very sensitive issue whether religion based politics should be banned or not. The present article emphasizes the main issues of the roots of the political usage of religion in Bangladesh and its implications in the social phenomenon.*

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Political Use of religion, secularism, Communalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are two fold relationships between religion and politics. One is religion based politics and the other is political use of religion. Both forms are persistent in Bangladesh politics. It was not an overnight matter that religion and politics were interlined together. Religion has always been used as one of the strongest maiden of the political parties for achieving their goals. This paper attempts to explore the political use of religion in Bangladesh. More specifically, this is an attempt to show how Islam is being used as a political weapon in the politics of Bangladesh. In this concern, the first four decades of the history of Bangladesh since 1971 will be critically examined.

II. METHODOLOGY

The article has been prepared with the assistance of the secondary data including several bodies of texts and by analyzing the several regulations/Articles of Bangladesh constitution. The political use of Religion has been analyzed in this article in the light of different scholarly chorological perspective. In order to prepare this article, the data has also been collected from several archives and academic books.

III. ORIGIN AND HISTORY

Religion based politics means a political process where people try to establish the ideals and laws of religion in society and state.

But this aspect has two connotations. From one side this can be seen positively where the religion based political activists use religious teachings for the betterment of humanity, state and religion itself. On the other side a group of people claim that they run their politics on the basis of religion but in reality their activities are against religion and humanity. They spread their own explanation of religion and thus superstitions take over facts. They use religion as the handmaiden of oppression. (Haq:2013, p.180) If the destructive activities of religion can be kept aside, then religion based politics can be continued where religion and religious party plays a vital role in the promotion of human rights. Professor Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq remarks: 'There is no possibility of misuse of religion based politics if the destructive activities are excluded and if the path of scientific politics is widened'. (Haq: 2013, p.180)

Religion based politics is not uncommon in the western world. Even in Germany, the Christian Democratic Party is running the government. In England, the Queen is the Head of the Anglican Church. In this case, couples of things are important. Is it possible for any political party to keep aside the negative aspects of religions? Is it possible to maintain the scientific path of politics for everyone? Who will ensure the scientific model where different countries have different cultural contexts? In today's world or more specifically in today's Bangladesh, principal problem is not the religion based politics. Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq remarks that political use of religion or abuse of religion in politics is the fundamental cause of the discourse between religion and politics in Bangladesh. (Haq:2013, p.181)

In the history of human civilization there are hardly any misdeeds which had not been taken place in the name of religion. It is said that India was divided because of fanatic Muslims. But it is partially true. Anisuzzaman depicts it differently illustrating that the emergence of Pakistan and India as separate states was a chronological process of political history of India. (Anisuzzaman: 2015, p.25-34)

It was religion that played the key role in propaganda culture against each other. Even Maududi, the founder of Jamat e Islami, opposed the new state Pakistan. He used to call Jinnah as 'Kafir e Ajom' and Pakistan as 'Napakistan' or 'insane'. (Anisuzzaman, 'Daharmarastra, Dharmanirapeksata o Rastraddharma': 1993, p. 17.)

It was only political motive of Maududi for which he didn't hesitate to describe a land insane. Even he was responsible for the communal riots of India during 1940s. (Didarul Islam, 'Political Use of Religion in Bangladesh':2014) The process is being continued still today by his descendents. He welcomed the brutality of Pakistan Army on the mass people of Bangladesh during our liberation war. It was none other than political cause that directed him to work on behalf of them in the name of religion.

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IV. SECULARISM V COMMUNALISM

Bangladesh became an Independent state in 1971 after a nine months bloody war. The country has its long historical roots or political identity from 6th century AD especially during the time king of king Sasanka or Pala period. The first constitution of Bangladesh came into scene when the Gana Parisada passed the Constitution Bill on November 4, 1972 and afterwards, it was enforced from December 16, 1972 on the first victory day of Bangladesh.

According to Clause 1, Article 8 of the constitution the principles of The People's Republic of Bangladesh will be Democracy, Socialism, Secularism and Bengali nationalism. (**Bangladesh Constitution:2011, p.4**)

Article 12 explains secularism as follows: The principle of secularism shall be realized by the elimination of

- a. Communalism in all its forms.
- b. The granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion.
- c. The abuse of religion for political purposes.
- d. Any discrimination against or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion. (**Bangladesh Constitution: 2011, p.4**)

The constitution of Bangladesh has guaranteed the freedom of religion to all the citizens of the state. As per provision Article 28, the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of religion, race, cast, sex or place of birth. .(**Bangladesh Constitution:2011, p.8**)

Article 41(1) mandates; "subject to any law, public order and morality."

- a. Every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion.
- b. Every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions. (**Bangladesh Constitution:2011, p.12**)

Article 41(2) further provides that no person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instructions, or to keep part in or to attend any religious ceremony or worship, if that instruction ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own. (**Bangladesh Constitution: 2011, p.12**)

So, Bangladesh is a secular state where the secular constitution has guaranteed the freedom of religion to its every citizen. The constitution of 1972 banned religion based politics in order to ensure the freedom of all religious faith and to establish secularism in a firm basis. (**Anisuzzaman, Secularism and Communalism:2015, p.56**)

This was a tough challenge for the government also. Because by taking this decision, the government had to fight against the propaganda of these parties. These parties were always alert to take all sorts of privileges by this propaganda. Another important issue was that maximum religion based political parties were against our Liberation War. The Collaborators were from these sorts of political parties who participated in genocide, rape, firing, robbery and many other types of war crimes. The leaders of these parties who were involved in war crimes and many of them fled to Pakistan and Middle East. (**Haq:2013,p.182**)

Jamat-e-Islami, Nejam-e -Islami, Pakistan Democratic Party and Muslim League lost the rights to engage in

politics. There is a misconception that these four parties were banned due to their basis on religion. But in fact they were banned because they had direct participation in genocide, rape, firing, robbery and many other types of war crimes. (**Haq:2013, p.**)

Surely they tried to use Islam for their own benefit. The conspirators tried to circular that the government is an atheist government and people will lose their rights to practice their own religions respectively. But Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman clearly identified what secularism is in his parliament speech. The speech is as follows:

"Secularism doesn't mean faithlessness, much less atheism. It is meant to ensure the right of each and every citizen of the country to practice his/her religion. We don't want to ban the practice of religion by enacting laws, nor shall we ever. The Muslims will continue to practice their religion, no one can prevent them. And the Hindus will continue to practice theirs, no one can stop them. And so will the Buddhists and the Christians. The only thing that we won't allow is the use of religion as a political weapon. We have seen for the last 25 years how grievous vices like killings, persecutions and rapes are committed in the name of religion in Bangladesh. Religion is indeed a very sacred thing, and this must not be used for political gains. Let me reassure you that it (adoption of secularism) has not curtailed people's religious rights. I have only arranged for each and every citizen of the country to practice his/her religion out of his own free will." (**Anu Mahmud:2011, pp. 44-64.**)

Bangabandhu initiated the recitation from the Holy Religious Texts; the Quaran, the Bhagabat Geeta, the Bible, the Tripitak in radio and television. Madrasa education was patronized and Islamic foundation was established to spread the teachings of Islam. Bangabandhu joined the Islamic Summit at Lahore in February, 1974 and two months later he joined the foreign ministers conference held at Jeddah for the establishment of Islamic Development Bank. (**Ali Riaz: 2013, p.54-55**)

These steps were taken to make people understand that secularism has no confrontation with Islam and other religions. Sometimes critics identify these measures against the underline spirit of secularism. Dr. Ahmed Sharif described it as "Pseudo secularism". (**Ahmed Sharif: 2004, pp.148-155.**)

After the fall of Awami League when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was brutally assassinated, the future of secularism became uncertain. Since the killers of Bangabandhu were pro-Pakistani who wanted to make Bangladesh a Pakistani model Islamic state. After Bangabandhu, khandakar Mostaq became the president with the help of the killers of Bangabandhu such as major Rashid, Major Faruq, Mohiuddin and others. He declared Bangladesh as an Islamic Republic.

After some consecutive coups in 1975, Ziaur Rahman became the president and made the 5th amendment of the constitution by eliminating the term "secularism" and introducing the complete faith in Allah. Bangladesh was formally declared to be a Muslim state with Islam as the official religion. (**O' Connell:2001, p.181**) Being the head of the state Ziaur Rahman made some amendments through a proclamation (Second Proclamation Order no. 1, April 23,

1977). The amendment changed the article no. 6 of the original constitution and replaced our nationality from "Bengalee" to "Bangladeshi". (Ali Riaz, p. 57)

. A change in the preamble was also made. The term "historic struggle for national liberation" was replaced by "historic war for national independence". (Ali Riaz, p. 57) Article 8 was changed where secularism was replaced by "absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah" and a new clause (1A) was inserted to emphasize that "absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah" should be "the basis of all actions." (Ali Riaz, p.58)

Above the preamble "Bismilla hir rahmanir Rahim" was inserted to portrait the constitution as an Islamic constitution. Article 12 which depicts Secularism was omitted.

By the political party ordinance of 1977, Ziaur Rahman allowed religion based politics. (Haq, p.182) By this step, the Jamat-i-Islami and the Muslim League were back in the political scenario of Bangladesh after a long time underground struggled. So, from the very day of the approval of religion based politics in Bangladesh, the country became a breeding place for religious orthodoxy.

Though the ordinance was issued in 1977, the basement for the Jamat-e-Islam and the Muslim League was being prepared from the late 1975. In 1976, the then Deputy Chief Law Administrator, Air Vice Martial M. G. Tawab attended a religious gathering organised by the Jamat-e-Islami which slogans was to transform Bangladesh an Islamic state. Although this gathering had little significance on the political arena of Bangladesh but the point is that, when all kind of political activities were banned they were organizing political programs in disguise. (Ali Riaz, p. 58) In 1977, the government appointed a Syllabi Committee which declared Islam as a 'code of conduct of life'.

The government also established the Madrasa Education Board in 1978 and the Madrasa students got the opportunity to enter into the universities. The government launched a new ministry called 'Ministry of Religious Affairs' and declared the birthday of the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as holiday. (Ali Riaz, p. 59)

By the Political Parties Regulations (1976), once banned political parties got privileged to practice political programs at a limited scale. In the meantime, president Ziaur Rahman arranged a referendum where he won and formed Bangladesh Nationalist Party in 1978 and in the general Presidential election in 1979, he was elected president by a huge manipulation. (Ali Riaz, p.61)

In this election, the Islamists political parties were united under the banner IDL; Islamic Democratic League which got 20 seats and contested in 265 seats. (Ali Riaz, p.60) President Zia cunningly used religion in politics. He tried to set up Islamist political parties as a part to defend Bangladesh Awami League. (Haq, p. 178)

Dr. Zeenat Huda argued that President Zia necessitated Islam for his invented nationalism. It was also evident that president Zia formulated a new nationalism named Bangladeshi nationalism instead of Bengalee nationalism which emphasis more on Bengalee-Muslim identity rather than an identity for all. (Zeenat Huda:2008, p.144-153) Few crucial aspects of Zia regime can be mentioned.

a. He re-established once banned political parties.

- b. He eliminated the secular features from the constitution. He tried to portrait himself as a devotee of Islam to the people of Bangladesh.
- c. He tried to keep a good relation with Pakistan and with the Middle Eastern countries.
- d. To keep aside Bangladesh Awami League, he consciously used Islamists to portrait Awami League as an atheist party. He knew that people of Bangladesh are pious and it was so easy to circulate this kind of rumor rather than other things.
- e. To grab the political power, he used religion. He invited the imam of Mecca and Mohammad Ali, a world famous heavy weight champion and declared them as the hero's of Islam. Even in the state controlled Television and Radio, the identified collaborators started to preach religion. As a result the Muslims of Bangladesh started to think Ziaur Rahman as an admirer of Islam. In his cabinet, there were identified collaborators like Shah Aziz and Maolana Mannan who took part in the genocide during our liberation war. Another war criminal Absus Sobur khan elected as MP from 3 seats of Khulna and he was buried at the Parliament court yard. All these things were the examples of political use of religion. (Ali Riaz, p.58)

After the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman, Hussain Muhammad Ershad became the president of Bangladesh. He was one step ahead of Ziaur Rahman in portraying himself as a great devotee of Islam. During his time, he made the 8th amendment of the constitution. This amendment made Islam as state religion. And with this amendment, religion based politics was institutionalized. During 1980s, political use of religion got new velocity. The president himself would identify himself as a patron of Islam. He frequently attended the religious programs throughout the country. (Ali Riaz, p. 62)

By this sort of act, he tried to inform the pious people of Bangladesh that he is a pious Muslim. And in order to ensure the vote in the election and to make his power valid. He tried to establish a good relationship with the orthodox political parties in order to strengthen his power.

In late 1982, he declared that Islam would be the basement of new social system and a perfect place of Islam would be given in the constitution. In 1983, he wished to make Bangladesh as Islamic state which he mentioned as reason for his lifelong struggles.

Amena Mohsin writes: "February 21, which stands as the very epitome of secular Bengali nationalism, was given an Islamic twist by Ershad. In early 1983 he declared that the drawing of "Alpana" (painted designs) on the premises of the Shaheed Minar was an un-Islamic practice and should be substituted with recitations from the Holy Quran. Referring to the significance of February 21 he declared: "This time the movement is for the establishment of an Islamic state." This stand negated the very spirit of the day, as it symbolized the struggle of Bengalis to fight the hegemony of West Pakistanis in the name of Islam. The policy could not be implemented due to strong opposition from the entire Bengali community, which cherishes its Bengali heritage as much as its religious beliefs. But it did suggest the course that the polity was about to take. Ershad based his policy of Islamization on two planks: (1) mosque-

centered society, and (2) Islam as the state religion.” (Amena Mohsin:1984, p. 476)

In 1988, the 8th amendment bill was passed and Islam was made ‘state religion’. This had created a great impact on the secular spirit of Bangladesh. Because Bangladesh was born as a secular state and secularism was one of the four principles of the 1st constitution of Bangladesh. (Ali Riaz, p.62) To keep a state religion implied that other religions are second class.

This constitutional change created a minority complexity among the non-Muslims. The main reason of Ershad to bring this change was to portray himself as a devotee of Islam. He knew that the people of Bangladesh are pious and God fearing. Majority people are Muslims. So if he could satisfy them, his power might be permanent. President Ershad used to visit many Pirs (religious priests having many followers) and majars (grave yards of saintly people). (Ali Riaz, p.62)

He used to patronize religious gatherings and sometimes he attended there. All these things of President Ershad were parts of his show off character. With the circulation of his religious activities, he wanted to keep people aside from knowing his corruption. But interestingly, President Ershad couldn't grab the support of Islamic political parties. Even Jamat-I-Islami didn't support President Ershad. Although making of Islam as state religion was a clever game of Ershad, yet the Islamic political parties identified the move as ‘hypocritical move’ to resist a genuine Islamic movement. (Ali Riaz, p.62) It was more interesting when the Awami League, the BNP and the Leftists called a strike against the amendment, Jamat-i-Islami didn't join there.

That was ambivalent character of Jamat-i-Islami. Because firstly they didn't support the move of Ershad but they didn't protest against it. But surprisingly when president Ershad was busy in making a good relation with the orthodox political parties, the upsurge against him grew stronger. This movement was led by the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. They made a joint movement with some orthodox religion based political parties like Jamat-i-Islami who were prohibited to practice politics in independent Bangladesh earlier. In 1990, president Ershad had to step down from his throne and the path of democracy was opened.

New era of democracy was opened through the general election of 1991. This election is also a vivid example of the political use of religious symbols and icons. As part of strategy to gain popular support, the Awami League, the BNP, the Jamat-I-Islami and the others started to use religion in their campaign.

The main election campaign of BNP was if Bangladesh Awami League would be elected, they would remove “*Bismilla hir rahmanir Rahim*” from the constitution. Sheikh Hasina dismissed that claim and said that she had no quarrel with ‘*Bismillah*’. The slogans of the political parties, along with the posters were so interesting. The slogan of the BNP men was: “*La ilaha Illallah, Dhaner sise bismillah*” (‘There is no God save Allah, vote for paddy sheaf saying God the merciful’). The activists of the Awami League used to chant: “*La ilaha Illallah, noukar malikm tui Allah*” (‘There is no God save Allah, the boat belongs to Allah’). The slogan of the Jamat-I-Islami supports was: “*Vote dile pallay,*

khushi hobe Allah(Allah will be pleased with you if you vote for scale).” (Ali Riaz, p.64)

It was really heinous that Jamat-I-Islami used to sell indulgence like the middle age churches. They used to go to the religious people and used to sell that indulgence telling them that would guarantee Heaven in afterlife. In the General election of 1991, BNP got the plurality in number of seats and formed the government.

But Jamat-i-Islam got 17 seats which was a constant threat for secularism. This was the sign of gaining new velocity of orthodox politics in Bangladesh again. But in 1996 election, they got just 3 seats. They were back in politics being much stronger in 2001 election when BNP made alliance with Jama- i-Islam and they got 17 seats. This year is really significant in terms of the rise of Islamic militant in a more strong way.

The reasons were numerous but the main two reasons were the direct torture of the BNP Jamat men on the minorities across the country. And the other reason was the terrorist attack 9/11 by Al Quaida in USA. BNP understood that as the religion based political parties are gaining popularity at least a minimum level, BNP men became more radical in identifying Awami League as against Islam. At the same time two from Jamat, Motiur Rahman Nizami and Ali Ahsan Mujahid were made ministers who were identified war criminals. This heinous act was criticized by the Bengali people. It was the use of Islamic sentiment both by BNP and Jamat I Islami.

In this election, National Islamic allied Front, lead by Bangladesh Jatiya Party and comprised with some religion based political parties got 14 seats. Jamat-I -Islami Bangladesh got 17 seats. So, this election proved that BNP had to depend on Orthodox political parties for going into the chair. In the meantime, after 2001, jamat-I-Islam, Khelafat majlish, Islamic Shariah Movement and other parties continued their organizational work in order to establish religion based politics in a firm basis. In 2006, progressive Awami League made 14 party alliance comprising Khelafat-e Majlish, a complete radical orthodox party. It was in order to show that they were not against Islam and the ongoing propaganda against them was false.

In the election manifesto, Awami League declared that they would not enforce any law which might contradict to Quran and Hadith, the tradition of the last prophet of Islam, i.e. Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh). (Election Menifesto:2008)

V. THE FUTURE OF SECULARISM IN BANGLADESH

Thus the history of Bangladesh has seen the abuse of religion for the sake of politics. Political parties identified one another either as atheist or fundamentalist or in so other titles which are directly related to religious sentiment. Each and every political party has used religion just to grab political power, not from the live toward religion. Now the main question comes how this use of religion in politics can harm secularism in Bangladesh. According to the secularism of Bangladesh, religion cannot be used as a political weapon and any particular religion will not enjoy special favor. All the religions will enjoy equal rights and in order to establish a religious harmony, every religion will be encouraged.

Religion will be treated as a personal affair instead of state affair. (Didarul Islam, 2014)

But after 1975, the basic spirit of secularism was corrupted. Firstly the principle of 'secularism' was omitted from the constitution. Secondly Islam was established as State religion. And finally secularism was re-established in the constitution keeping Islam as state religion. The 15th amendment established secularism. But considering the religious sentiment and the propaganda against them, the ruling Awami League didn't eliminate Islam as state religion.

As the concept of state religion is contradictory to secularism and Mujibism also, yet the main concern has become to grab the vote of pious people of Bangladesh by using the religious sentiment. When the term state religion is applied, the followers of other religions feel inferior. Because to identify a particular religion as state religion means to identify other religions second class. But all the parties forget it easily. So, to use religion in politics has become a common and fashionable practice for the political parties. From the above analysis, it is very much evident that religion has an intensive root in the politics of Bangladesh. No party will try to speak against it. Day by day, the influence of religion in Bangladesh politics is increasing. The rise of Hefajot-e-Islam is a vivid example. (Ali Riaz, *How did We Arrive Here*: p. 57) That can accelerate the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh. It is true that Bangladesh is in threat in this regard.

VI. CONCLUSION

Religion seems to be one of the most important driving factors in the political discourse of Bangladesh. The political culture of Bangladesh has so far been dominated by the religious propaganda. Although after Independence War Bangladesh started its journey by comprising secularism as one of the main fundamental principles, but the military rulers after defying the principles included religion as the most strongest principles of Bangladesh, which shattered the secularist character of Bangladesh. The constitution of 1971 Bangladesh included secularism as one of the main principles among her four fundamental principles. But this change after the military rulers included Islam as the state religion. This not only shattered her secularist character but also gave rise of fundamentalist ethos in Bangladesh. The rise of newly emerging fundamentalists Islamic groups is alarming as they were threatening the long tradition of co-existence and co-operation among the different religious communities in Bangladesh. The culture of secularism that had been dominated Bengal's history, culture and tradition for long time has been threatened by political rise of Islam in Bangladesh. Bangladesh needs to be more vigilant to face the issue and took enough measures so Bangladesh would go back to her original principles of secularism that would check the rise of religious militancy and would create new environment of secularism in Bangladesh.

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