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***The role of Islam in the polity and identity construction:  
the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh***

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**ABSTRACT****The role of Islam in the polity and identity construction:  
the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh**

The exact role of religious ideology in national identity formation has proved to be a highly complex phenomenon throughout the history of Pakistan, for its very well-known ideological magnitude as a state and prevailing practical realities of an ethnically and culturally highly diverse territory. Instead of providing a solution to the challenges of nation formation in Pakistan, the partition of East Pakistan in 1971, i.e. the creation of Bangladesh, has led to even more questions concerning national identity, since it casted doubt upon whether Islam per se provides a stable basis of nation formation. How was the role of Islam in nation formation and the polity of the new states of post-1971 Pakistan and Bangladesh defined? How and to what extent did Pakistani and Bangladeshi political leadership use Islam as a political tool to create a sense of national unity? In this paper my main aim is to focus on the role given to religion in the polity and state-led nation building process in Bangladesh and Pakistan through the lens of post-1971 political history of the two states. I argue that an attempt at an overarching Islamisation process (that Pakistan eventually went through under Zia ul-Haq's rule) was an inexorable consequence of the two-nation theory - i.e. that Islam was, per se, the *raison d'être* and the sole umbrella ideology to hold together the socially and culturally highly heterogeneous society. While in Bangladesh, on the other hand, the presence of a strong sense of ethno-linguistic belonging limits the Islamisation of national identity.

**ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ****Az iszlám szerepe a nemzet- és államalkotásban: Pakisztán és Banglades esete**

Pakisztán létrejöttének folyamatában igen összetett kérdésnek bizonyult a vallási ideológiának a nemzettudat kialakításában játszott szerepe, különösen a terület etnikai, nyelvi és kulturális heterogenitásának tükrében. Kelet-Pakisztán elszakadása 1971-ben –vagyis Banglades függetlenné válása – sem segítette a nemzetépítés folyamatát Pakisztánban. Éppen ellenkezőleg: megkérdőjelezte, hogy az iszlám követésének toposza elegendően erős nemzetalkotó erővé képes-e válni, ezzel párhuzamosan pedig

rámutatott az etnikai-nyelvi alapú hovatarozás erősségére, mely felülírni látszott a kialakulóban lévő pakisztáni nemzettudatot és új nemzeti identitástudat alapjául szolgált Bangladesben. Hogyan próbálta definiálni a pakisztáni és bangladesi állami vezetés az iszlám nemzetalkotásban és állami berendezkedésben játszott szerepét 1971 után? Hogyan és milyen mértékben használta a vallást eszközként a két ország politikai elitje a nemzeti összetartás erősítésére? Jelen tanulmány célja annak megvilágítása, hogy az 1971 utáni bangladesi és pakisztáni politikai vezetés hogyan törekedett egységes nemzettudat kialakítására, és milyen szerepet szánt az iszlám vallásnak a nemzet- és államépítés folyamatában. Az esszében amellet érvelek, hogy Pakisztánban az átfogó iszlamizációs törekvés (mely túlnyomóan Zia ul-Haq vezényletével ment végbe) a Pakisztán-ideológia és a két nemzet-elmélet egyenes következménye. Más szóval, az államalkotó ideológia predesztinálta Pakisztán iszlamizálódását azáltal, hogy létjogosultságát kizárólag az iszlámra alapozva az etnikailag és kulturálisan rendkívül heterogén népeiséget összetartó erőként is egyedül a vallást határozta meg. Ezzel ellentétben a bangladesi népeiség etnikai-nyelvi homogenitása és identitástudata erősen ellensúlyozza és korlátozza a bangladesi nemzettudat iszlamizálására történő törekvéseket.

**DÓRA GÜNSBERGER****THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN THE POLITY AND IDENTITY  
CONSTRUCTION: PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH****I. INTRODUCTION**

Religion has come to play a crucial role in identity formation in South Asia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that was marked by the emergence of religious-political reform movements such as the Aligarh and Deoband movements. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ideas inspired by religion and religious thought provided the ideology behind the Partition of India and the theoretical framework of Pakistan's creation. Yet, given the ethnic, cultural and religious heterogeneity characterising the subcontinent, nation formation at par with state-building proved to be somewhat challenging issues in Pakistan. The partition of Bangladesh in 1971 proved that religion *per se* failed to provide unity in diversity, and the question of national identity remained a subject of struggle for both countries. Religion, in both cases, proved to be a conspicuous 'tool' to utilise for political purposes, leading to the questions this essay seeks to explore: to what extent can Islam determine state-led identity policy? What role does religion play in the nation-building efforts in Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively?

The central argument of this essay is that turning towards a wider use of religion in Pakistani polity and nation-building was an inexorable consequence of the two nation-theory as Islam was deemed to be the only umbrella-term that could hold together the culturally and socially disparate components of the society in a bid to forge national identity. On the contrary, while religious elements undoubtedly play a determining political role in Bangladesh, a substantial sense of ethno-linguistic identity proved to have held back the Islamisation of Bangladeshi identity and polity. In this essay I seek to illustrate my argument by focusing on identity formation as a state-led process and by examining the top-down nature of Islamisation primarily through legal channels, the measure of its success and the consequences it accrued in both countries. Before tackling

the questions above, it is necessary to briefly delineate the common history of the two countries and to underscore the tensions that eventually led to partition in 1971.

## II. THE CASE OF PAKISTAN

### II.1. THE IDEA OF PAKISTAN AND THE QUESTION OF PAKISTANI IDENTITY: ISLAMIC OR SECULAR STATE?

Pakistan was the realisation of a political dream. In search for a homeland of Indian Muslims, the idea of Pakistan was based on the two-nation theory; whereby Hindus and Muslims form two distinct nations in terms of culture, religion and societal order. In theory, Islam was the ideological propulsion and cementing force for the divergent social and cultural groups of the Muslims in South Asia. Similarly, following Partition Islam was meant to be an 'ideological glue' between East and West Pakistan – the two parts of the new country were not only divided physically, but culturally, linguistically and economically too. Given that Islam was the *raison d'être* of Pakistan, the question of the nature of polity immediately arose: since Islam had been in danger, but was saved eventually by the creation of Pakistan, was then Pakistan going to be an Islamic state?

In his often quoted 'Gettysburg speech' on the floor of the Constituent Assembly on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1947, Pakistan's founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah indicated that Pakistan was to be a secular state.<sup>1</sup> However, Jinnah passed away merely a year after Partition and those wanting Pakistan to be an Islamic state were quick to assert their position. Abu Ala Maududi's Islamist party, the Jamaat-i Islami, for instance, was a rather zealous advocate of the Islamisation of Pakistan and envisioned creating the ideal Islamic state.<sup>2</sup> The *ulema* also stood in favour of Islamising Pakistan, however, traditionalist ideas of the specific characteristics of a desired 'Islamic state' varied markedly. On the other hand, some promoted the idea of creating a 'secular' Pakistan, where Islam would play no role in the state structure and politics. In reality, the country's ideological foundation could hardly be predicated on secular principles, since the promulgation of an entirely

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<sup>1</sup> 'You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan... You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the State...' Quoted in AHMED 1997: 175.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on Maududi's ideology see HARTUNG 2013.

secular system would have negated Pakistan's *raison d'être*. Thus, a third school of thought emerged, advocating a compromise between the ideas of secularism and an Islamic state. They envisioned Pakistan's polity as based on the characteristics of Western democracy and Islamic moral principles combined, where Islam was to play a symbolic role in the polity.

The conspicuous differences between various views on what precise role Islam was to play in Pakistani polity manifested in harsh debates among the respective political factions and these resulted in an inability to form the country's constitution for nearly a decade. The lack of a mutually acceptable compromise that left the country without a unified political leadership and a constitution was threatening the new country's order. Under the prime ministership of Liaqat Ali Khan the first step was taken towards creating a constitution: the Constituent Assembly passed the Objectives Resolution in 1949, containing basic principles of a future constitution. While the Objectives Resolution did not explicitly indicate that Pakistan was to become an Islamic state, it included a passage claiming that 'sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to Allah Almighty alone.'<sup>3</sup> This altogether obliterated the possibility of creating a state based on secular principles and thus technically predetermined the basic nature of the Pakistani polity.

## II.2. HETEROGENEOUS SOCIETY AND THE IDEA OF UNITY

It is often argued that Pakistan failed to create national unity throughout its history as the ideology behind the state of Pakistan was provided by the two-nation theory – arguing that Muslims and Hindus form two distinct nations –, but at the same time, definite sociological qualities of a nation were lacking.<sup>4</sup> Jinnah's vision of Pakistan as a state of 'one nation, one culture, one language' certainly missed to recognise the social and geographical diversity as an essential feature of the newly born state. Consisting of five provinces (one of them East Bengal, 1600 kilometres away from West Pakistan), the new state proved to be extremely heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, language, culture and even religion. Therefore, the hardships of identity politics were quite clear even from the very outset and ethnic differences manifested immediately after the first attempt towards

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<sup>3</sup> *Objectives Resolution* 1949.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance JAFFRELOT 2004.

nation-formation. While the strained relations were quite conspicuous between the East–West wings of the country, the fissures within West Pakistan also had begun to appear soon after Partition: for instance, the Punjab–Sindh rivalry, and the *mohajir*<sup>5</sup>–Punjab conflict exacerbated the ethnic and cultural differences.<sup>6</sup>

### II.3. THE LANGUAGE ISSUE AND THE PARTITION OF EAST PAKISTAN

Islam and Urdu languages were presumed to be the essential features of Pakistani identity. Urdu, as a *lingua franca* had a highly symbolic meaning in Pakistani nation-building. Written with *nastaliq* script and its vocabulary being highly influenced by Farsi and Arabic, Urdu was seen as a suitable language for an Islamic nation: Jinnah himself ordered ‘Urdu, and only Urdu’ to be the sole official language of Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, Urdu came to acquire the status of Pakistan’s national language despite the fact that it was the mother tongue of only 6% of the population. The Urdu-speaking classes were mostly the *mohajirs*, predominantly residing in West Pakistan. As it is well known, the language issue has stirred up tensions and caused resistance in East Bengal, thus giving birth to a student movement demanding equivalent status to Bengali (or Bangla) – spoken by the actual majority of the population of Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> But the West Pakistani elite denied Bengali to be a language at par with Urdu mainly for ideological reasons. Bengali script and vocabulary, according to them, was developed under the ‘corrupting influence of Sanskrit’ and was, therefore, not compatible with Islamic identity.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the fact that most of the national authors writing in Bengali (such as the celebrated poet, Rabindranath Tagore) were actually Hindus, further strengthened antipathy towards Bangla. Attempts were made to ‘Islamise’ Bengali in 1950 – for instance, the introduction of Arabic script and Persian words were initiated –, however, these proved to be highly unsuccessful.<sup>10</sup>

The 1952 student demonstrations in favour of the Bengali language are usually considered as first steps towards the Bengali liberation movement. Even though the

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<sup>5</sup> Indian Muslims who migrated to Pakistan from India after Partition in 1947.

<sup>6</sup> ISLAM 1981: 60–61.

<sup>7</sup> SHAIKH 2009: 52.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the place of Bangla in Pakistan after partition see RAHMAN 1996: 79–102.

<sup>9</sup> TOOR 2011: 28.

<sup>10</sup> TOOR 2011: 26–31 and RAHMAN 1996: 89.

demonstrations were successful in a sense that the government of Pakistan eventually recognised Bengali as a national language in 1956, tensions persisted as East Pakistani politicians were grossly discriminated against in national politics. This peaked in 1970, when despite winning the elections (288 out of 300 positions in East Pakistan and 167 out of 300 in the national elections), the East Pakistani Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his party, the Awami League were prevented from forming a government.<sup>11</sup> This act of President Yahya Khan led to general strikes, and the army entered East Pakistan in order to put down the revolts. After nine months of bloody struggle, East Pakistan, with considerable Indian help, gained independence on 16 December 1971. The fact that Bangladesh was established as a secular nation state meant that ethnic identity in practice overwrote 'Pakistaniness' and Islam clearly failed to be the cementing force between the two wings of the country, thus jeopardising the national integration of Pakistan.

#### II.4. THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN PAKISTANI NATIONAL IDENTITY AFTER 1971

It is still a matter of debate whether the separation of Bangladesh was foreseeable or not and whether it was in favour of Pakistan in the long run. Some argue that the division of East and West Pakistan had been predictable ever since the Partition in 1947<sup>12</sup>, while others claim that the separation of Bangladesh was in fact 'almost an accident'.<sup>13</sup> However, the national question, or the question of nation yet remained unresolved. Additionally, the two-nation theory seemed to lose its legitimacy – as Tariq Ali phrased it, 'the two-nation theory, formulated in the middle class living rooms of Uttar Pradesh, was buried in the Bengali countryside.'<sup>14</sup> Pakistan, given that it was the ideology behind the state formation, sought to prove the validity of the two-nation theory by claiming that the majority (70%) of Indian Muslims still chose to live outside of India.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the separation of Bengal signified the victory of ethnic identity. Bengalis were far from being the only ethnic group fighting for independence from Pakistan and provincialism did not cease with the partition of East Pakistan: for instance,

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<sup>11</sup> ZIRING 1992: 55–74.

<sup>12</sup> ISLAM 1981: 62.

<sup>13</sup> KARIM n.d.: 1.

<sup>14</sup> SHARMA 2000: 183.

<sup>15</sup> SHAIKH 2009: 54.



Sindhi and Balochi movements for autonomy signalled a rather strong sense of provincial and ethnic identity.<sup>16</sup> To summarise, the separation of Bengal not only re-opened the question of national identity, but also had given rise to serious doubts on the process of Pakistani nation-formation.

#### II.4.1. ISLAMISATION IN PAKISTAN UNDER BHUTTO AND ZIA

In light of the circumstances of Pakistan's creation one might conclude that Islam was a slogan used to mobilise support for the Pakistan movement, whilst the specific meaning of phrases such as 'Islamic state' and 'Muslim homeland' were left somewhat undefined. Islam remained of more or less symbolic significance in the polity but played a major role in attempts to keep the new country intact. The separation of East Pakistan proved that religion failed to become a 'national glue' between diverse cultural and ethnic factions, yet, Islam was used as a means to justify the bloody crackdown of East Pakistani revolts by West Pakistani troops after 1971.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Islamisation was chosen as a tactic to dispel the enormity of the shock of 1971 and to ward off any prospects of the Balkanisation of the country and to provide political legitimacy, regardless of the prevalent ideological discrepancies. The rationale behind the turn towards Islam in the political rhetoric was that there was no other umbrella-ideology that could be put to use for ensuring unity in such a heterogeneous country. As Pakistani historians concluded after the cessation of East Pakistan: 'If the Arabs, the Turks, the Iranians, God forbid, give up Islam, the Arabs yet remain Arabs, the Turks remain Turks, the Iranians remain Iranians, but what do we remain if we give up Islam?'<sup>18</sup>

Islamisation in Pakistan is often claimed to have started with Zia ul-Haq's overarching political rationale aiming at creating an Islamic order, referred to as *Nizam-e Mustafa*. But looking closely at the post-1971 era reveals that in fact it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who laid down the cornerstones of a Zia's Islamisation, though it seems that all his efforts were aimed at using religious symbolism simply to bring about economic reforms

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<sup>16</sup> HUSSAIN 1976: 930.

<sup>17</sup> The government of Pakistan found legitimacy for their acts in citing the moral failure of Bengal and in claiming that Bengalis were not true Muslims and Pakistanis. SHAIKH 2009: 53.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in SHARMA 2000: 184.

with the financial aid from the Gulf States.<sup>19</sup> Bhutto sought to enforce Islamic socialism<sup>20</sup> and simultaneously wanted to provide the country with an Islamic constitution. The Constitution of 1973 declared Islam the state religion and Article 227 reiterated the conformity of legislation with Islamic injunctions.<sup>21</sup> The Constitution further stated that the Prime Minister and the President must be Muslims. Subsequently, after the anti-Ahmadiyya movement re-emerged in 1974, a new element was added: both the Prime Minister and the President were obliged to confess their faith and acknowledge the finality of Muhammad's Prophethood.<sup>22</sup> This clause was the first step of the open exclusion of the Ahmadis<sup>23</sup>, which was officially declared as a non-Muslim community in 1974.<sup>24</sup>

Before Zia ul-Haq's ascent to power, religious symbolism was present in the nation-building process and political rhetoric, but no attempt was made to transform the political, legal and economic structures into Islamic ones.<sup>25</sup> Zia ul-Haq, on the other hand, made 'Islamisation' the *raison d'être* of his regime and thus legitimised his rule. He proclaimed that Islamisation was in fact an extension of Jinnah's and the Muslim League's will to create a homeland for Indian Muslims and his policy, therefore, was a way to create national integration.<sup>26</sup> As per his Islamisation policy, Zia introduced further Islamic injunctions in the Constitution that had lasting ramifications. The following few legal amendments illustrate Zia's intentions to introduce *Nizam-e Mustafa*. The Federal Shariat Court was set up in 1980, as a body to guard the compatibility of the laws of the country with *shari'a*. The Third Constitutional Amendment in 1985 expanded the definition of a Muslim person and constitutionally declared the Ahmadiyya as a non-Muslim

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<sup>19</sup> KHORY 2007: 10.

<sup>20</sup> Islamic socialism meant for instance land and labour reform and supporting the poorer groups. For further details see TALBOT 2009: 230–232.

<sup>21</sup> 'All existing laws shall be brought in conformity with the Injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah, in this Part referred to as the Injunctions of Islam, and no law shall be enacted which is repugnant to such Injunctions.' *Constitution of Pakistan*. Part IX, Islamic Provisions. Article 227.

<sup>22</sup> *Constitution of Pakistan*. Third Schedule, Oaths of Office. Article 41 and Article 91(5).

<sup>23</sup> The Ahmadiyya community holds the belief that *Mahdi* or Messiah is yet to come, therefore hold a different position about the finality of the prophethood.

<sup>24</sup> The Second Amendment provided the definition of a Muslim person: 'A person who does not believe in the absolute and unqualified finality of The Prophethood of Muhammad (Peace be upon him), the last of the Prophets or claims to be a Prophet, in any sense of the word or of any description whatsoever, after Muhammad (Peace be upon him), or recognizes such a claimant as a Prophet or religious reformer, is not a Muslim for the purposes of the Constitution or law.' *Constitution (Second Amendment Act) 1974*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance KHORY 2007: 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

community.<sup>27</sup> Zia's Islamisation left its most visible mark on the legal system, especially criminal law. The Hudood Ordinances of 1979 introduced punishment based on *shari'a* law in *huddud*<sup>28</sup> cases; for instance the cutting off the hand of a thief, or stoning as a punishment of *zina*<sup>29,30</sup> Furthermore, blasphemy laws were introduced between 1980 and 1986, which made blaspheming the name of Prophet Muhammad punishable with death or imprisonment for life and the accused was liable to pay a fine also; and disrespecting the Holy Quran in any way with life imprisonment.<sup>31</sup> Zia made efforts to Islamise the economy as well: *zakat*<sup>32</sup> was introduced in 1980 and *riba* (interest) was banned – even though practically it continues to this day. Additionally, Islamic studies was made compulsory in Pakistan's education system: the National Education Policy and Implementation Programme of 1979 reasserted the role of mosque schools and made studying of Islamiyat and Pakistan studies compulsory.<sup>33</sup>

## II.5. CONSEQUENCES OF ISLAMISATION: ISLAMISED POLITICS AND POLITICISED ISLAMIC IDENTITY

As the aforementioned examples prove, Zia ul-Haq's Islamisation policy expanded to all the spheres of life: religion has irrevocably become an organic part of Pakistan and Pakistaniness. Negating Islam has become synonymous with negating Pakistan, and, as Akhtar puts it, 'no government that has followed the Zia regime has dared to reopen the question of Islam's role in the polity.'<sup>34</sup> As of nationalism, a survey conducted by the *Express Tribune* in 2012 showed that 49% of the population considers him- or herself a Muslim first and a Pakistani second, while only 28% of respondents consider themselves Pakistani first and Muslim second.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> '(b), "non-Muslim" means a person who is not a Muslim and include a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Parsi community, a person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves "Ahmadis" or by any other name), or a Bahai, and a person belonging to any of the Scheduled Casts.' *Constitution (Third Amendment) Order*, 1985.

<sup>28</sup> Plural form of *hudd*, i.e. certain acts, which have been explicitly forbidden in the Quran.

<sup>29</sup> Unlawful sexual intercourse.

<sup>30</sup> *The Offence of Zina (Enforcement Of Hudood) Ordinance*, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> *Pakistan Penal Code*.

<sup>32</sup> Compulsory religious tax levied on the Muslims.

<sup>33</sup> RAHMAN 2004

<sup>34</sup> AKHTAR 2009: 23.

<sup>35</sup> SYED et al 2012: 6.

Unlike Saudi Arabia or Iran, Pakistan never explicitly sought to impose one monolithic version of Islam, at least not initially. However, Islamisation – in light of the above context and definition – was not free of a sectarian ideology and Zia’s Islamisation programme was based on mainly the Sunni interpretation, and, as a consequence, a certain type of Sunni sectarian Islam emerged as a defining feature of Pakistaniness in the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> Zia’s Islamisation was, therefore, strongly opposed by the Shia community.<sup>37</sup> As Vali Nasr argues, as a result of Zia’s Islamisation, the Shia-Sunni conflict has changed in its nature: from being a religious schism, it has become a mere political conflict around mobilisation of communal identity and a form of religio-political nationalism.<sup>38</sup> Radical anti-Shia Sunni parties appeared in the Pakistani political palette: for instance the Sipah-e Sahaba in 1985 with its paramilitary offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in 1994 (carrying out most of the anti-Shia and anti-Hazara attacks) and allies such as Tehrik Nifaz Shariat-i Muhammadi, Lashkar-e Taiba or Sipah-e Muhammad.<sup>39</sup> Relations between Sunni and Shi’a sects took a violent turn and sectarian killings have started in the mid-1980s.<sup>40</sup> Violence against Shi’as has been escalating ever since: in 2012, at least 70% of all sectarian attacks were against the Shi’a community.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, a significant proportion of Pakistani society question whether the Shiite community is Muslim at all: according to the results of a survey conducted by the Pew Forum, 37% of the respondents do not consider Shias Muslims.<sup>42</sup>

Bhutto’s and Zia’s way of narrowing the definition (and, as it is, providing a definition at all) of a Muslim person has by no means promoted unified identity. By politicising Islam and providing state support to a certain understanding of Islam in the name of Islamisation, religion has become a disintegrating factor in Pakistan. As emerging sectarian tensions illustrate, the ‘Islamisation’ of Pakistaniness led to a new line of schism in Pakistani society and religion once again failed to be the cementing force in Pakistan – however, for different reasons than in 1971.

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<sup>36</sup> SHAIKH 2009: 64.

<sup>37</sup> 10-15% (about 25 million people) of the population of Pakistan belongs to the Shia branch of Islam.

<sup>38</sup> NASR 2004.

<sup>39</sup> SHAIKH 2009: 85.

<sup>40</sup> Ehsan Ellahi Zaheer was murdered in 1987 and one year later, the leader of Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Fiqh-i-Jafariya, Allama Arif ul-Husseini was shot. KAMRAN 2009: 67.

<sup>41</sup> South Asia Terrorism Portal.

<sup>42</sup> ‘The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Pew Research Center 2012.

### III. THE CASE OF BANGLADESH

In comparison with that of Pakistan, Bangladeshi society appears less fragmented in terms of ethnicity, cultural and linguistic belonging. This might suggest that the idea of a Bangladeshi nation is more 'intact': some, like Samaddar and Ziring claim that in the case of Bangladesh a nation is present, while state-building is still in process.<sup>43</sup> However, others, for instance Lewis, Milam or Hashmi argue that Bangladesh is still in search for its identity. According to the latter scholars, the reason behind Bangladesh's identity crisis is that despite the fact that Bangladesh was formulated as a secular nation state, religious elements immediately gained political grounds.<sup>44</sup> Religion, used as a source of legitimacy and an element of nationalism in the state-led nation formation process has resulted in a confusion concerning loyalty.

During its short but chequered history, Bangladesh was characterised by two models of identity construction. The first one that I call 'Bengali identity', built on a common Bengali culture and language, without a strong accentuation of religious belonging. The second model was based on a sense of territorial belonging with a significant emphasis on Islam, that I refer to as 'Bangladeshi identity'.

#### III.1. FROM BENGALI...

As Mohsin argues, the secular nature of the emerging nationalism in East Bengal was a logical outcome of the past, when East Pakistanis were oppressed by West Pakistan in the name of religion and Islamic nationhood.<sup>45</sup> Fighting for the separation of East Pakistan and the establishment of a secular state of the Bengali nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League put the emphasis on Bengali as a common language and culture. The movement demonstrated neutrality towards religious difference and, as Kabir puts it, religion was pushed to a subordinate position.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See SAMADDAR 2002 and ZIRING 1992.

<sup>44</sup> See LEWIS 2011; HASHMI 2004 and MILAM 2009.

<sup>45</sup> MOHSIN 2004: 471.

<sup>46</sup> KABIR 2007: 474.

The Constitution of 1972 enshrined secularism as one of the state's four pillars – however, it is important to note that the term used in the constitution was *dharma-nirapeksata*, which means religious neutrality rather than secularism.<sup>47</sup> Religious neutrality was extended to the private sphere and politics was to be kept strictly secular: in Article 12, the Constitution of 1971 practically banned religion-based politics by eliminating the abuse of religion for political purposes.<sup>48</sup> As Ziring argues, Bengalis were a community even before Partition and no 'outer' ideology was necessary to bind them together.<sup>49</sup> Bengalis appear to have maintained a strong sense of ethno-linguistic self-consciousness and, as for Bangladesh, it meant a ready-given identity and an ethnically rather homogeneous nation.

### III.2. TO BANGLADESHI

As it is often argued, despite his rhetoric and proclaimed religious neutrality, religion has never been fully excluded from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's policy. Hashmi and Riaz outline the generous state patronage given to *madrassa* education: the budgetary allocation for Islamic seminaries rose from Taka 2.5m to Taka 7.5m by 1973. Furthermore, Bangladesh joined the Islamic Summit and established the Islamic Development Bank under the rule of Mujib as well.<sup>50</sup>

The clear shift towards a religion-based national identity politics could be observed after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1975. The re-emergence of Islam in state polity and identity politics is often linked to Ziaur Rahman's search for legitimacy to his military-led rule.<sup>51</sup> However, it was a far more complex phenomenon than merely a political ploy of a military dictator. First, turning to Islam had economic reasons. According to Hashmi, the failure of establishing a welfare state played a significant role in the adoption of political Islam, since clinging to religious ideas was a

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<sup>47</sup> Sheikh Mujibur Rahman defined religious neutrality the following way: 'Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. Hindus will observe their religion; Muslims will observe their own; Christians and Buddhists will observe their religions. No one will be allowed to interfere in others' religions. The people of Bengal do not want any interference in religious matters. Religion cannot be used for political ends.' Quoted in MOHSIN 2004: 470.

<sup>48</sup> HUQUE and AKHTER 1987: 203, 8.

<sup>49</sup> ZIRING 1992: 2.

<sup>50</sup> RIAZ 2005: 173.

<sup>51</sup> SHARMA 2000: 193.

means to achieve ‘Golden Bengal’ through Islamic justice and egalitarianism.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Khatun outlines the direct links between financial dependence on the Middle East, free-flowing capital from the Gulf countries and lack of development and the re-emergence of Islamic identity.<sup>53</sup> Second, identity-formation being a state-led process, secularism failed to reflect the societal spirit of Bangladesh. Huque and Akhter argue that despite the fact that Bangladesh was constitutionally secularised, the ‘nature of the society’ could not be changed. According to them, Islam has an overwhelming influence on Bangladeshi society, since Islamic values predominate and religious education play a significant role in the formulation of Bangladeshi social formation.<sup>54</sup> Third, secular identity raised a highly significant issue in terms of self-determination; namely, that without Islam, East Bengalis could not be sharply demarcated from their Indian counterparts. This, according to some, could have provided a breeding ground to potential revisionist politics. Therefore, it appears that the reappearance of religious sentiments was at least partly caused by the fear of Indian domination and the failure of the Awami League to improve the poor economic situation of the country.<sup>55</sup> Besides the points mentioned above, the significance of the legitimacy of Zia’s authoritarian rule can hardly be under-stated: the rise of the military as a political actor and the ouster of the Awami League gave rise to the legitimacy crisis, and Ziaur Rahman had no other option but to turn to religion to stabilise his rule.

### III.2.1. ZIA AND ERSHAD’S ISLAMISATION EFFORTS

Ziaur Rahman’s rule brought about a sudden turn in terms of the process of identity formulation. Zia’s regime created a new ideological narrative by emphasising Islam and territoriality as two of the main components of national identity and thus laid down the bases of Bangladeshi identity.

Through a proclamation in 1977, Zia made significant constitutional amendments: in Article 6 the term ‘Bengali’ was changed to ‘Bangladeshi’. Article 12 was omitted; the word ‘secularism’ (one of the four pillars of the state) was deleted and replaced by

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<sup>52</sup> HASHMI 2004: 45.

<sup>53</sup> KHATUN 2010: 92.

<sup>54</sup> HUQUE and AKHTER 1987: 208.

<sup>55</sup> KABIR 2007: 484.

'absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah' in Article 8 and by '*Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*'<sup>56</sup> in the Preamble. A new clause 1(A) was added to outline that 'absolute trust and faith in almighty Allah should be the basis of all actions.'<sup>57</sup> Zia also lifted the ban on religious-based politics and Islamic parties, including Jamaat-i Islami, were allowed to operate. Additionally, he adopted Islam as an instrument of state policy: the Bangladesh National Party, founded in 1978, sought to emphasise the Islamic way of life and the role of religion in politics, filling Bangladeshi national ideology with a tangible religious content.

After the assassination of Ziaur Rahman in 1981, Hussain Muhammad Ershad seized power and emulated his predecessor by turning to religion for legitimacy. Ershad concentrated on Islamising Bangladeshi polity to an even greater extent than Zia and expressed his desire to make Bangladesh an Islamic country.<sup>58</sup> Measures were taken to build up a 'mosque-centred society'; an 1988 Constitutional amendment declared Islam as the state religion and there was a rapid growth in the number of (especially Deobandi) *madrassa*.<sup>59</sup> Symbolic actions also marked the attempt to Islamise Bangladeshi identity: Farsi and Arabic Islamic phrases, like *Bangladesh zindabad* (instead of *Jai Bangla*) or the Farsi phrase *Khoda Hafez* (God bless you) became more widely used as per the government's encouragement, Friday was declared as an official holiday and Red Cross was renamed Red Crescent.<sup>60</sup>

By scrutinising Zia's and Ershad's efforts to Islamise Bangladesh, one might conclude that even though Islamic injunctions were introduced, these were rather superficial and cosmetic. Therefore, unlike in the case of Zia ul-Haq's Islamisation in Pakistan, the basic legal, economic and societal framework of Bangladesh remained largely secular.

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<sup>56</sup> In the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful.

<sup>57</sup> RIAZ 2005: 174.

<sup>58</sup> As Ershad put it: 'Islam being the religion of the majority of the population will be given the highest place in the country's future constitution and Islamic provisions will be included wherever necessary.' HUQUE and AKHTER 1987: 9.

<sup>59</sup> MILAM 2009: 237.

<sup>60</sup> MOHSIN 2004: 477.



### III.3. THE RESULTS OF INCORPORATING RELIGION IN THE NATIONAL IDENTITY AND POLITY

Bangladesh has experienced a sudden turn from secularism to a policy that sought to make Islam an integral part of national identity. However, this seemingly did not lead to the complete extirpation of secular principles of social and state structures. Here I argue that despite Islamism resurfaced in Bangladesh, secularism still had palpable resonance in terms of its politics and ideology. Using Rashid's expression, secularism was not just a 'fever' that Bangladesh got over in 1975.<sup>61</sup>

#### III.3.1. EMERGING ISLAMISM

The policy of Islamisation, enforced by Zia and Ershad enabled Islamic parties to enter the national political arena, and by 1993 Islam as a political ideology had become part of the Bangladeshi polity.<sup>62</sup> As the following examples show, Islamism undoubtedly managed to win more space over the last two decades than before.

First, Islamist parties gained considerable political clout and standing in Bangladesh. The Jamaat-i Islami has become the third largest party and an actual 'kingmaker': they formed alliance with the BNP in 2001, however, differing in ideology, they considered their coalition as mutually beneficial.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, *jihadist* groups Tabligh-i Jamaat and Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (the latter well-known for its support of Osama bin-Laden) also emerged in the 1990s and have been carrying out attacks against secular elements – for instance, a series of bomb blasts in cinemas of Mymensingh in 2002 is a case in point.<sup>64</sup> Second, the ever-growing sectarian conflict in Bangladesh, similarly to the Pakistani case, has soared quite considerably. Before 1980, sectarianism was not a predominant factor in Bangladeshi society, mainly due to the small and politically inactive communities of non-Sunni Muslims. But sectarianism in Bangladesh kicked off against the Ahmadiyya community and particularly after 2003, violence against the Ahmadis triggered the wave of sectarianism. Islamist groups demanded them to be declared non-

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<sup>61</sup> BANU 1992: 147.

<sup>62</sup> RIAZ 2005: 176.

<sup>63</sup> UDDIN 2006: 171.

<sup>64</sup> VAN SCHENDEL 2009: 209.

Muslims – this, however, unlike in Pakistan, never happened. However, the Ahmadis remained the target of the Islamists: the community came under virulent attacks, killings and bombing of mosques, mainly carried out by the Khatm-e Nabuwat Movement.<sup>65</sup> Third, the violence against women and secular objects justified by *fatwas* became more and more common: the first *fatwa* was issued against Taslima Nasreen.<sup>66</sup> However, the situation has been improving in the last couple of years. Even though the abolition of the *fatwa* is not an option for ideological reasons, the Supreme Court has introduced some regulations regarding the issuing of *fatwas* and in some cases banned the issuing of such *fatwa*, which ‘violates or affects the rights or reputation or dignity of any person which is covered by the law of the land’.<sup>67</sup>

### III.3.2. BANGLADESH AS AN ISLAMIC STATE?

Some, like Lintner and Riaz, argue that Bangladesh is at risk of further and more extreme Islamisation because of the rising tendency of Islamism.<sup>68</sup> Others, like Milam contend that Islamism can be avoided when an efficient government is at the helm.<sup>69</sup> In my view, even though religion is a significant element of Bangladeshi identity, several factors seem to guarantee that a Pakistan-like Islamisation is not likely to happen in Bangladesh.

First, in 2011 the 15<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill reintroduced secularism as one of the four main pillars of the state and made basic provisions of the Constitution not amendable.<sup>70</sup> This means that Bangladesh is, as declared by the Constitution, a secular country – however, unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh has never been an Islamic Republic. Moreover, Ershad’s zealous Islamist initiatives were in fact strongly opposed: despite his efforts, the Constitution was not changed on the lines prescribed by *shari’a* and the learning of Arabic and Islamiyat did not become compulsory.<sup>71</sup> Enforcement of Islamic

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<sup>65</sup> The Khatm-e Nabuwat (Finality of the Prophethood) Movement’s aim was to declare the Ahmadiyya a non-Muslim community. The same movement prevailed in Pakistan and was a strong advocate of the matter, that eventually reached its goal in 1974. Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Taslima Nasreen is a feminist writer. Her novel *Lojja* about anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh enraged a group of clerics to the extent that they issued a *fatwa* demanding her death. SCHENDEL 2009: 208.

<sup>67</sup> KHAN 2012

<sup>68</sup> LINTNER 2002 and RIAZ 2005

<sup>69</sup> MILAM 2009: 239.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Salient features of 15th amendment of Constitution’ 2008.

<sup>71</sup> MOHSIN 2004: 477.

law is, therefore, highly unlikely in Bangladesh, since such demands do not appear widely supported (except in the case of some Islamist groups, as mentioned above).

Second, some features of the Bangladeshi society help prevent further Islamisation of the polity. Huque and Akhter outline the specific situation of women in the society: for economic reasons women are compelled to leave their homes and work. As a result, the number of women in the job market is constantly increasing and they are now found in all fields of professions.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the influence of Sufism has to be mentioned as well. Sufism has a long history and an influential role: *pirs* and shrines have symbolic status in the Bangladeshi society. According to Huque and Akhter, for its more open interpretation of Islam Sufism contributes to the general tolerance and adaptability of the Bangladeshi society.<sup>73</sup>

And lastly but most importantly, Bengali identity still features very strongly in the Bangladeshi social formation. Unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh is nearly homogeneous in an ethnic and linguistic sense: according to the Socio-economic and Housing Report, in 2011 Bangla was the mother tongue of almost 99% of the population and about the same percent of the population is ethnically Bengali.<sup>74</sup> Evidently, common culture, ethnic and linguistic belonging constitute strong elements of national identity, as marked for instance by Ekushey, a month-long cultural festival in February commemorating the independence movement that is celebrated by Bangladeshis regardless of religious belonging. The common slogan indicates that secularism still holds sway: 'Our identity is in Ekushey.'<sup>75</sup> Secondly, a survey conducted by Razia et al further proved the complexity of Bangladeshi identity markers by inquiring among urban and rural population about features of Bangladesh that constituted a source of national pride. The majority of the urban respondents (47%) named secular categories, for instance language, independence or Bengaliness, while only 7,9% named Islam as an epitome of their national pride. Among the rural respondents, the numbers vary: 14,9% named secular categories and 8,9% referred to Islam as sources of feeling proud to be Bangladeshi.<sup>76</sup> Despite the slight differences between the rural and urban responses, the survey highlighted that Islam is a secondary element of national pride.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> HUQUE and AKHTER 1987: 208.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2012.

<sup>75</sup> UDDIN 2006: 129.

<sup>76</sup> However, 40% did not understand the question. BANU 1992: 149–158.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

After 1971, Bangladesh and Pakistan still seem to be facing unresolved questions concerning their national identity. Both countries experienced Islamisation, however, the extent of this and subsequent consequences greatly differed in them.

In Bangladesh, the integration of religion in the polity and the concept of national identity has led to a confusion concerning loyalties. As a result of Zia's and Ershad's attempts to Islamise Bangladesh, religion has become a part of the Bangladeshi polity and Islamic parties have entered the political sphere. However, an Islamisation similar to that of Pakistan did not happen and secularism is still very much a feature in the Bangladeshi political sphere and national identity. As it was illustrated earlier, the move by the Bangladeshi parliament to reinstate the word secularism in the Bangladeshi constitution supports the argument that Bangladesh has retained and embedded within the political and legal process a commitment to secularism. As I argued in this paper, this can be at least partly explained by the fact that Bangladesh has one distinct feature that Pakistan does not have: ethno-linguistic homogeneity.

On the other hand, in Pakistan's case Islam – more specifically, Sunni Islam - has become an organic part of the polity and played a major role in efforts to build a national identity. Despite this, identity in Pakistan has remained multi-layered in its nature and is fractured along linguistic, ethnic, cultural and even religious lines. Islam has failed to be a unifying force: Islamisation, despite Zia's intention to create national unity through religion, has only accentuated sectarian differences and led to the exclusion of the Ahmadiyya sect, moreover, to escalating violence against the Shia community. Altogether, however, the state of Pakistan and several of its institutions remain committed to Zia's Islamic interpretation of official nationalism, despite its inner contradictions.

Budapest, April 2018

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