

**Becoming Bengal:  
Understanding Islam as Political Technology  
in East Bengal and Bangladesh**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree  
with Honors in History

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## Introduction

Since 2000, the United Nations has observed February 21 as International Mother Language Day. On the official website for the day, the UN writes that “languages are the most powerful instruments of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage”, and that languages are important vehicles to protect “opportunities, traditions, memory, [and] unique modes of thinking and expression” that define all cultures.<sup>1</sup> The choice of February 21 as International Mother Language Day aligns with an important day in the Bengali Language Movement. In 1952, students at Dhaka University in East Bengal protested for the recognition of Bengali as one of Pakistan’s two state languages.<sup>2</sup> These protests ended in a conflict between the students and Pakistani police that left four student protesters dead.<sup>3</sup>

The Awami League continued to fight for the equal representation of Bengalis within Pakistan after that country declared Bengali to be one of its two state languages in 1952.<sup>4</sup> Twenty years later, the leader of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, declared Bangladesh an independent nation built in response to what he called “steady onslaughts [that had] been made against the language and culture of the people of Bangladesh by the ruling cliques” of Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Here, Mujibur Rahman considered Bengali language, along with the ethnic and artistic expression of Bengali culture important to protect from Pakistan’s outsider treatment of such tenets. Such defenses served as the foundation of the Bangladeshi national movement.

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<sup>1</sup> “International Mother Language Day, 21 February,” accessed November 15, 2018, <http://www.un.org/en/events/motherlanguageday/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*, Islamic Civilization & Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 125.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Kurzon, “Romanisation of Bengali and Other Indian Scripts,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 1 (2010): 71.

<sup>4</sup> Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Mujibur Rahman and Rāmendu Majumadāra, *Bangladesh, My Bangladesh: Selected Speeches and Statements, October 28, 1970, to March 26, 1971* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972), 58.

In 1972, Bangladesh first constitution established nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as its four foundational principles.<sup>6</sup> The political application of the last of these principles changed significantly in the early history of the nation. At the end of the decade, a martial law administrator amended the constitution to include replace secularism with a “full trust in mighty Allah”.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 80s, another authoritarian regime amended the constitution to establish Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup> In less than two decades, the constitution of Bangladesh shifted from identifying with secularism as a defining characteristic of the nation, to aligning with the idea of Islam being the state’s official religion.

Why this happened is the subject of considerable debate. Some argue that confidence in the importance of Bengali ethnic and linguistic identity drove Bangladesh’s formation. Ferdous Jahan and Asif Shahan posit that the creation of Bangladesh stemmed from Bengali opposition to Pakistan’s leading East Pakistan as a nation centered on religion. Reacting against Pakistan, Bengali leaders natural sought a strong national foundation that was independent of Islam.<sup>9</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta agrees, writing that Bengali language and culture grounded the notions of Bangladesh’s formation.<sup>10</sup> Mubashar Hasan shows how middle class intellectuals who promoted notions of western secularism, modernism and Marxism played a key role in the early years of Bangladesh’s independence.<sup>11</sup> These scholars argue that Bangladesh’s drift from secularism was

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<sup>6</sup> Ali Riaz, *Unfolding State: The Transformation of Bangladesh* (Whitby, ON: de Sitter Publications, 2005), 157.

<sup>7</sup> Jalal Firoj, “FORTY YEARS OF BANGLADESH PARLIAMENT : TRENDS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 58, no. 1 (2013): 104.

<sup>8</sup> Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ferdous Jahan and Asif M Shahan, “Power and Influence of Islam-Based Political Parties in Bangladesh: Perception versus Reality,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 49, no. 4 (August 2014): 429, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909613488350>.

<sup>10</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta, “Amidst the Winds of Change: The Hindu Minority in Bangladesh,” *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 2 (April 2012): 290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2012.664434>.

<sup>11</sup> Mubashar Hasan, “The Diverse Roots of the ‘Secular’ in East Pakistan (1947–71) and the Crisis of ‘Secularism’ in Contemporary Bangladesh,” *History and Sociology of South Asia* 11, no. 2 (July 2017): 166–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2230807517703721>.

an outright rejection of a nationalist principle critical to the vision of the nation's founders. This approach assumes that Islam's rise within the country was not inevitable, and that Bangladesh's foundation was authentically secular, an approach that fell apart because of an influx of Islamist politics that began early in the country's history. While these explanations understand a portion of what motivated Bangladesh's independence, they oversimplify the historic role that religious identity played within the politics of Eastern Bengal.

Other authors see Bangladesh's formation as an inherently Islamic story. Zillur Khan argues that the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the construction of Bengali nationalism through language and ethnicity as the product of economic exploitation of Bengali Muslims from both non-Muslims and non-Bengalis.<sup>12</sup> U.A.B. Razia Akter Banu contends that there were close links between religion and expressions of nationalism. According to Banu, Bengali Muslims did not disregard religious identity in their decision to fight for the independence of Bangladesh.<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Nazrul Islam and Muhammad Saidul Islam, point out that none of the early platforms of Bengali Muslim parties in Pakistan suggest that Islam and Bengali values were incompatible. On top of that, they argue that subsequent platforms of these parties, specifically the Awami League, did not explicitly advocate for secularism when pressing for the independence of Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup> These arguments dictate that the use of religion as a political tool was always part of Bangladesh's history, and that the country's initial declaration of secularism did not have a strong enough foundation to sustain itself in the long term.

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<sup>12</sup> Zillur R Khan, "Islam and Bengali Nationalism," *Asian Survey* 25, no. 8 (n.d.): 834.

<sup>13</sup> U. A. B. Razia Akter Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology 58 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 148.

<sup>14</sup> Md Islam and Md Islam, "Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh: Contesting the Dominant Narratives," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (March 3, 2018): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7030037>.

Other readings argue that Bangladesh's path to independence were not directly related to identity expression. Norman Brown argues that the Pakistani government exploited the province of East Pakistan in a quasi-colonial way. Aside from identity suppression, Brown points out that Pakistan did not evenly distribute political and economic capital to East Pakistan, on top of the fact that India separated East and West Pakistan altogether.<sup>15</sup> This perspective suggests that East Pakistan sought independence to escape the exploitation they faced at the hands of the Pakistan's authoritative government. Richard Sisson and Leo Rose's book about the Bangladesh Liberation War, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India and the Creation of Bangladesh*, focuses on how the war and its aftermath were shaped by tense relations between India and Pakistan, as well as Bengali distrust of Pakistan. Instead of focusing on the role that shared Bengali Muslim experiences played in shaping the political consciousness of the East Pakistani people, Sisson and Rose look at the conflict as an extension of India and Pakistan's tense relationship.<sup>16</sup> Srinath Raghavan acknowledges that most treatments of Bangladesh's independence consider it from "the perspective of memory, violence and identity," and that linguistic and economic factors drove the country's formation. To this end, this perspective argues that these tensions and what they produced were not inevitable outcomes of Pakistan's creation.<sup>17</sup>

In practice, Bangladesh's formation and construction integrated religion into existing categories of identity formation. Benedict Anderson has argued that nationalism results from interactions between shared languages, religion and culture, where historical conversations between sociocultural forces like language serve as the foundation for the political and

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<sup>15</sup> W. Norman Brown, *The United States and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh*, [3d ed.], The American Foreign Policy Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 129.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 4–7.

ideological constructions that a nation reflects.<sup>18</sup> Building upon Anderson's work, Peter Van der Veer suggests that language's role as "the primary basis of community" serves as the basis which religious communities link communication, shared ritual practices and the greater nation to create distinct national identities. Van der Veer concludes that Bangladesh was a due to a Bengali nationalism rooted in the Bengali language. This characterization argues that East Pakistan's shared language, ethnicity and brand of Sufi-inspired, syncretic worship unified the region, subsequently serving to separate it from Pakistan.<sup>19</sup>

Others do not see evolving identity as the foundation of national identity. Smith argues that pre-modern interactions and communities serve as the foundation of what defines modern nation states shape nations, which does not adequately explain or discredit the role that religious identification has in shaping these interactions.<sup>20</sup> This sees modern identity markers as factors that result from the process of constructing nationalism. Eric Hobsbawm, a historian, writes that societies can form a sense of shared identity through the process of invented tradition, where the "formalization and ritualization" of a tradition can serve to create a shared social and cultural foundation that is fixed enough to bind people together, but flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the times.<sup>21</sup> This reading sees the interactions between these evolving definitions of shared and powerful identity markers as critical to how modern nations construct themselves. Historians Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper question the utility of "identity" as a unit of analysis

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<sup>18</sup> Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, n.d.), 197.

<sup>19</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 78–80, 172.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony D. Smith, "The Origins of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12, no. 3 (1989): 340–367, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1989.9993639>, 340–341.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, ed., *The Invention of Tradition*, Reissue edition (Cambridge Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2–4.



altogether. Brubaker and Cooper argue that nationalism does not require ethnic or racial identity, pointing out that a desire for nationhood can exist independent of identity markers.

All of these theories serve as useful methods to balance the processes of national identity formation and function of the state to understand how nationalism took shape in Bangladesh. Religion, ethnicity, or language are not precise enough markers to define how the nation sought to envision itself, but the interactions between these factors and state function in pre-colonial, colonial and East Pakistani Bengal created the complicated situation that Bangladesh found itself in when forming its sense of national identity expression. While the national identity expression of Bengali Muslims evolved with each new iteration of leadership, the creation of Bangladesh served as one of the first times when the question of integrating religion became the concern of Bengali Muslims themselves, rather than a body that ruled over East Bengal.

Before the colonial period, Bengali Muslims had a relatively short history in East Bengal, not becoming a sizeable majority in the region until later in empirical Bengal's history. Because of the long-established presence of Bengal Hindus, syncretic worship and linguistic expression processes fueled the spread of religion, while differing settlement patterns bred broader economic, political and intellectual differences between the two religious groups. Over the course of colonization, British India found ways to build upon these differences to divide Bengali Muslims and Hindus. This eventually resulted in the British creation of separate nations for Hindus and Muslims: India and Pakistan. As Bengali Muslims adjusted to being part of Pakistan, religious unity became less important when compared to mistreatment and inequities in the country that directly affected Bengali Muslims, fueling the development of Bengali unity and nationalism in creating the state of Bangladesh. In its early years, the country struggled to maintain political, economic and social order. This eventually enabled the country's increasingly

authoritarian leaders to invoke loyalty to Islam as a politically expedient to extract support and engender some sense of national unity. Instead of serving as a consistent source of political unification and mobilization, Bengali Muslim politicians have adjusted their embrace of religious expression and rhetoric to meet specific needs and national problems.

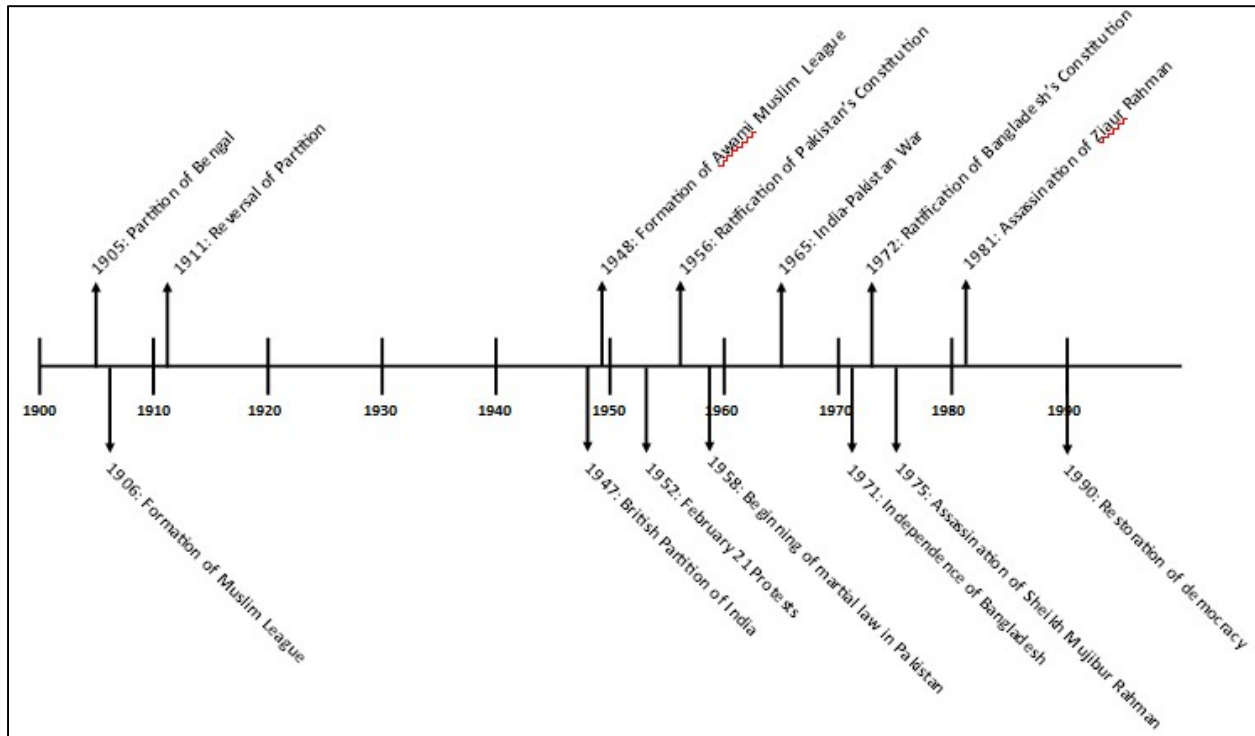


Figure 1: Timeline of major 21<sup>st</sup> century events in East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh

Chapter 1 looks at how Bengali Muslims in the eastern half of the Bengal delta developed a collective identity rooted in shared history. The processes that drove Islam's spread in the region set up a foundation for the economic and political exploitation of Bengali Muslims during British colonialism. During this period, Bengali Muslims did not have a means of mass expression and political mobilization, while Bengali Hindus in the western half of the region defined anticolonial in ways that did not reflect different Muslim perspectives. The British exploited these differences to quell anticolonial opinion by partitioning Bengal along religious lines into two different provinces in 1905. While the British reversed this partition six years later,

it served as the foundation for a specifically Bengali Muslim anti-colonialism. This foundation in religiously oriented politics led to Bengali Muslims aligning themselves with Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League in the years before the British partition of India in 1947.

Chapter 2 discusses how Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan negotiated their own sense of national identity while under the rule of a Pakistani nation that imposed its own sense of nationalism, political authority and economic power. Pakistan almost immediately challenged the strength of religion as a tool of national unity by making Urdu the country's only state language, a decision that led to substantial protests and opposition from Bengali Muslims. This fight was the first major time the relationship between East Bengal and Pakistan came into question. The disarray of the Pakistani state led to an increased desire to unify the country in terms of religion and other identity markers, which drove the anger Bengali Muslims felt towards the Pakistani project, as well as the development of a national identity narrative to help Bengali Muslim political parties achieve equal representation. Eventually, this proved difficult to achieve without a separate state of Bengal, causing a war in 1971 that led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Bangladesh negotiated its relationship with Bengali ethnic identity and Islamic religious identity during its early years as an autonomous nation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League had political and historical rationale for embracing Bengali nationalism, a vision of collective identity in Bangladesh that was not directly tied to religion. Despite enshrining this principle within the country's first constitution, the political instability that Bangladesh faced early on encouraged Mujibur Rahman and his party to embrace Islam. Mujibur Rahman's authoritarian successor, Ziaur Rahman, continued in this direction for similar reasons, rejecting the premise of a secular, Bengali nation and coopting a vision of Bangladeshi nationalism, a collective vision where Islam was core to the country's national

identity expression. By the time General Hussein Muhammad Ershad, another authoritarian successor, came to power, Bangladesh's instability peaked as Ershad to embrace Islam to an even stronger degree. Despite this, the priorities of Ershad's opponents had shifted from invoking religion to provoke unity to channeling national solidarity to push Bangladesh towards a civil democracy where these questions could be reconsidered by the entire country, not just its politically strong.

While part of the greater Bengal delta, the half of the region that is now Bangladesh has developed in a very different way compared to its western counterparts. East Bengal's unique circumstances sit at the intersection of economic exploitation, Islamic practice, political instability, and a relatively short history of autonomous self-governance. None of these factors fully explain why Islam has become the potential political tool that it has historically been, but Islam has been both a coincidental byproduct of the economic structure of Bengali society and the center of how East Bengal and Bangladesh structured itself politically. The key to this evolution lies in the inconsistent scope of Islam's use as intentional technology to drive unity, solidarity or mobilization. The only constant has been the fact that East Bengal has had a consistent Muslim-majority since its early years as a fertile region of land, and the paper looks to understand the reasons behind the flexible application of Islam as a political technology throughout East Bengal's history under foreign empires, colonial rulers, and as the nation of Bangladesh.

## Chapter 1: Becoming Muslim in Bengal

In January 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of East Pakistan's Awami League, spoke out against "those who had made attempts to strangle Bengali language and culture in the name of Islam. Mujibur Rahman's decision to use language to define the Bengali nation was not arbitrary. By recognizing those who "sacrificed their lives for the cause of the people's rights" during the Bengali Language Movement of 1952, Mujibur Rahman linked the motivations of the movement with the aspirations of East Pakistan to become a nation of its own. He connected the lineage of Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan to "eminent authors and poets like Tagore and Nazrul and patriots like Suryya Sen."<sup>1</sup> Mujibur Rahman may have considered these authors to be essential to Bangladesh's early sense of national identity, but Tagore and Sen were not actually Muslim contemporaries of Bangladesh's nation builders.

Tagore was a Bengali Hindu author who envisioned a Bengali nation unified based on the principle of "Sonar Bangla".<sup>2</sup> This saying referred to a classless, egalitarian Bengal that did was unified despite religious differences.<sup>3</sup> When conceiving this vision for Bengal, the 189,000 square mile delta in the eastern half of the Indian subcontinent (Figure 2), it is important to understand his motivations for doing so.<sup>4</sup> The idea of "sonar Bangla" comes from a 1905 poem that Tagore wrote after the 1905 partition of Bengal, when the British divided the province of Bengal into two provinces based on where Hindus and Muslims were in the majority, creating

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<sup>1</sup> Mujibur Rahman, and Rāmenu Majumadāra. *Bangladesh, My Bangladesh: Selected Speeches and Statements, October 28, 1970, to March 26, 1971*. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972), 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> Anisuzzaman, "Claiming and Disclaiming a Cultural Icon: Tagore in East Pakistan and Bangladesh," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (October 2008): 1064, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.77.4.1058>.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Anil Baran Ray, "Communal Attitudes to British Policy: The Case of the Partition of Bengal 1905," *Social Scientist* 6, no. 5 (n.d.): 34.

two provinces that mirror the modern borders between Bangladesh and India.<sup>5</sup> Despite arguing for a region of Bengal that did not mirror the contemporary borders of East Pakistan, Tagore's invocation of a "Bengal of Gold" with "full blossomed paddy fields" and "banyan trees" spread "along the banks of [the] rivers" resonated enough with Bengali revolutionary leaders like Mujibur Rahman who sang the poems in moments of political strife and social uprising.<sup>6</sup>

The willingness with which Mujibur Rahman embraced Tagore reflects the poet's importance in East Bengali consciousness. East Bengal did not experience the same path to settlement as the western half of the delta. These differences didn't divide the two halves immediately, as the shared language and religious syncretism of the region unified the delta to some extent. However, the apparent economic, religious and intellectual separations between the two halves of Bengal became more substantial over time, especially during colonial rule. The British made decisions that augmented these differences, including the 1905 Partition of Bengal, and facilitated political mobilization within the two groups that strongly invoked religion as a tool of unification. Despite attempts to bring the two halves together, Muslims in East Bengal validated the vision of creating a Pakistan, a Muslim-majority homeland built from a partition of British India. This partition materialized in 1947, and marked the culmination of colonial efforts to augment the divide between the eastern, Muslim-majority half of Bengal, from the rest of the delta.

### *Bengal before British Colonization*

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<sup>5</sup> Poulomi Saha, "Singing Bengal into a Nation: Tagore the Colonial Cosmopolitan?," *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 2 (2013): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.36.2.1>.

<sup>6</sup> "National Anthems & Patriotic Songs - Bangladeshi National Anthem - আমার সোনার বাংলা (Amar Shonar Bangla) Lyrics + English Translation," accessed March 29, 2019, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/bangladeshi-national-anthem-amar-shonar-bangla-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%B8%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%82%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE.html>.

Muslims and Hindus each have deep roots in Bengal. The first written documentation of Muslims living in Bengal came from Mas'udi during the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Hindu dynasties like the Varman and Sena gained power in Bengal during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, facilitating the agrarian and religious transformation of the people of western Bengal. Because of how the Ganges River flowed westward through the Bengal delta, Hindu settlement of the region was largely to the west of the river. Thus, Hindu dynasties played a less direct role in the development of the delta's eastern half, and it did not experience the same trend towards Hindu religious practice or agrarian settlement taking place in the west.<sup>7</sup> Hindu empires primarily ruled Bengal until 1204, when Muslim forces, led by the Turkish ruler Muhammad Bakhtiyar, gained power in the region. While Bakhtiyar did not conquer Bengal completely, his capture of the city of Nadiya marked the beginning of over five centuries of Muslim rule.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 17 (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1996), 11-20.

<sup>8</sup> Perween Hasan, *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh* (London: Tauris, 2007), 9.



Figure 2: Goran tek-en, File:Map of Bengal.Svg, November 30, 2013, BlankMap-World gray.svg, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_Bengal.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Bengal.svg).

Early Muslim rule of Bengal came under the Delhi sultanate, which ruled over Bengal from a distance, giving the region a sense of autonomy. This autonomy increased when Shams al-Din Ilyah Shah separated himself and Bengal from the Delhi sultanate in 1342, with him and his son ruling until 1415. The Ilyah Shah dynasty returned to power between 1432 and 1486. ‘Ala al-Din Husayn Shah, an Arab with roots in Mecca, was the next major Muslim dynastic ruler of Bengal.<sup>9</sup> After his son, Nusrat Shah, took power in 1519, Afghans moving east towards Bengal with the Mughals began to settle in the region. In 1537, Shah’s successor, Sultan Mahmud, was finally defeated by an Afghan ruler.<sup>10</sup> The Mughals, who helped Mahmud during

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<sup>9</sup> Eaton, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Eaton, 138.



this conflict, began to make their way into Bengal, slowly taking over the entire region in 1612.<sup>11</sup> Most of the area that is now Bangladesh was under Mughal rule by the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup>

During the Mughal period, the Bengal region underwent substantial physical changes that made the settlement and cultivation of the eastern half of Bengal more feasible. Because of sediment accumulation in the region, rivers in the southeastern portion of the delta to flow more than before. This shift to the east made settled, wet rice, agricultural production methods from the western half of Bengal more possible in the eastern half of the delta.<sup>13</sup> To take advantage of this new agricultural potential, the Mughals cleared out this land and awarded plots of land to those who wished to own it and cultivate it.<sup>14</sup> The empire distributed *sanad* grants to anyone interested in holding land, regardless of religious background. These grants were not explicitly Islamic like the *waqf* grant, which only Muslims could receive.<sup>15</sup> Rather, they allowed anyone of any religion to own and cultivate land in this relatively undeveloped region, if they also built a religious structure to center the social development of the settlement.<sup>16</sup>

The distribution of these grants had two implications for the growth of Islam in the region. First, while Hindus did not have economic or political incentives to leave their agricultural strongholds in the western portion of Bengal, Hindu proprietors, called *zamindars*, began to serve as property owners who owned the land operated by someone else. Muslim religious leaders were among those who took advantage of this arrangement, sacrificing ownership over the land to use to build new settlements.<sup>17</sup> When allocating these land grants, the

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<sup>11</sup> Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*, Islamic Civilization & Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Eaton, 194-98

<sup>14</sup> Schendel, 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> Uddin, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Schendel, 30-31.

<sup>17</sup> Uddin, 23-24.

Mughals specified that the clerics who oversaw the cultivation of the land could obtain tax-free status as land cultivator by building a religious shrine on the land of the grant, as long as they also oversaw the task of clearing the land and cultivating it beyond the shrine alone.<sup>18</sup> This led to many Muslim clerics and landowners building mosques on these lands, along with *madrasas* and Muslim libraries that served as a center point for these new settlements.<sup>19</sup>

These projects did not work without the organic syncretism that took place because of interactions between native Bengalis and Muslim groups, and language served as a crucial boundary and vehicle by which Islam was able to take hold. Foreign-born Muslim rulers, known as *ashraf*, did not actively engage in the Bengali linguistic tradition, choosing to read Arabic and Persian language texts that only foreign leaders could read. These texts included the Quran and Hadith, which were not translated into Bengali until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Because of this, the Bengali language linguistic tradition was more strongly associated with Hindu elites and their literary traditions, as well as the rural Muslim commoners whose literary tradition did not include these directly translated Islamic texts.<sup>20</sup>

The translation of Islamic ideas to Bengali took place through creative modes that worked within traditional Bengali literary and linguistic traditions.<sup>21</sup> In its printed form, Bengal literature constructed historical and mythical traditions by using Bengali language literary elements in uniquely Islamic contexts. Muslim writers borrowed from the rhyme and verse constructions of Bengali poetry. These religious poems became among the most popular forms of Bengali narrative poetry. One example of this poetic style is Saiyid Sultan's *Nabi-Vamsa*, a

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<sup>18</sup> Schendel, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Uddin, 23-25.

<sup>20</sup> Zillur R Khan, "Islam and Bengali Nationalism," *Asian Survey* 25, no. 8 (n.d.): 839.

<sup>21</sup> Uddin, 18-26.

seminal poem that includes biographic accounts of Muslim prophets.<sup>22</sup> It used Bengali language poetic tradition to illustrate Islamic ideas using theological language and concepts that would resonate with those who may not have read the Quran or text from Hadith. Sultan integrated these doctrines into a language and scope that Bengali Muslims would understand and resonate with. Instead of direct translations of these texts, writers like Sultan used Bengali to express their conceptions of Islam, spreading ideas of faith through the linguistic bounds of the language.<sup>23</sup>

Through these means, Bengali language served as a vehicle where religious principles translated into collective identity constructions among Bengali Muslims. Along with the importance of a physical place of worship, language is also a crucial point in the formation of religious nationalism. While Benedict Anderson's understanding of "print-capitalism" is present in pre-colonial Bengal, religious translation through Bengali language brought the expression of the two together in a unique way in eastern Bengal.<sup>24</sup> Missionaries incorporated Islamic concepts and teaching in Bengali literary frameworks, and used Bengali to explain Islam in the context of that language.<sup>25</sup> Along with language, the dynamic of Bengali Muslims working under the authority of Hindu *zamindars* became a common means of agrarian unity, adding an economic component to the linkages between the Bengali language and Islam. These factors linked the experiences of Bengalis in the eastern delta to the syncretic Muslim tradition that developed in the region before the British colonization of Bengal in 1757.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 87–89.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Mojlum Khan, *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of Great Muslim Scholars, Writers and Reformers of Bangladesh and West Bengal* (Kube Publishing Ltd, 2013), 40–42.

<sup>24</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 165.

<sup>25</sup> Uddin, 18.

<sup>26</sup> James J. Novak, *Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water*, The Essential Asia Series (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 15.

*Islam and Nationalism in Colonial Bengal*

The British established rule over Bengal in 1757.<sup>27</sup> Between 1757 and 1858, the British East India Company administered the British rule of Bengal. The company's directors appointed a governor-general who served as the leader of the colonial apparatus, ruling from Calcutta (Kolkata), a city in Bengal founded by the British at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1858, the British monarchy took control over colonial India, including Bengal. The monarchy ruled and appointed an executive official, known as the Viceroy of India, to oversee the colony.<sup>28</sup> During the almost 200 years of colonial rule in Bengal, the British laid down the economic and political foundations of Bengali Muslim anti-colonial and nationalist mobilization. British initiatives in the region shaped the resentment of Bengali Muslims towards their Hindu counterparts.

Two broad colonial legacies defined Bangladesh's creation from an economic standpoint. The British introduced and formally codified the "permanent settlement" system in 1793. First, the system established *zamindars*, who had served as the landlords of the Mughal-era *sanads*, as the owners of their land if they paid taxes to the British colonial rulers. Because many of these property owners were Hindu, the colonial apparatus reinforced the problem of Muslims laboring for Hindu landlords. New bureaucracies in property ownership created a larger distance between the land administration hierarchy of the British, Hindus and Muslims. With this new control over land development, the British turned Bengal into a center for cash crop production. Jute, sugar, silk and tobacco became major, high-scale exports for the Bengali economy.<sup>29</sup> The scale of this agricultural land use established a foundation for Bangladesh as a nation built upon colonial agricultural exploitation. This "permanent settlement" system enforced a divide, if not an explicit

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<sup>27</sup> Novak, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Schendel, 64-65.

<sup>29</sup> Schendel, 60-64.

hierarchy, between the Hindu *zamindars* who owned the land under the auspices of the British, and the Muslims whose agricultural work created economic value from that land.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond land use, Calcutta, the capitol of the English government in India, became a center for the migration of higher-caste Hindus. Not only did this turn Calcutta into a center of Bengali Hindu affluence, but it also weakened the industrial power of Dhaka, which was the center of Muslim and economic power in east Bengal.<sup>31</sup> From 1790 to the end of the decade, muslin exports in Dhaka fell by almost one half, dropping from about 2.2 million rupees to 1.2 million rupees.<sup>32</sup> With the political and cultural center of the Bengal region in western Bengal, the eastern half of the delta had become less important to the British administration in the region. With the eastern half being a center for agrarian production and a Muslim-majority, the economic and political condition of the region put it at risk for economic exploitation.

The Hindu and Muslim experiences in colonial Bengal differed widely, and the divide between the interests of Calcutta's growing Hindu middle class and the mostly agrarian Muslims of the eastern delta was evident in Hindu-driven Bengal Renaissance occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Bengal Renaissance was a social, religious and cultural movement rooted in intellectual thought inspired by western thinkers that brought great changes to the political, scientific and artistic disposition of Bengalis in and around Calcutta.<sup>33</sup> This movement centered on middle-class Hindus, who called themselves *bhadrolok*, or 'gentleman,' who lived in the definitively urban setting of the Hindu-majority in Bengal.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Schendel, 60.

<sup>31</sup> Schendel, 64-65.

<sup>32</sup> Sirajul Islam, "Business History of Dhaka Upto 1947," n.d., 15–16.

<sup>33</sup> Anup Kumar Das, "Legacy of the Bengal Renaissance in Public Library Development in India," *IFLA Journal* 41, no. 4 (December 2015): 370, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0340035215603992>.

<sup>34</sup> Ali Riaz, *Unfolding State: The Transformation of Bangladesh* (Whitby, ON: de Sitter Publications, 2005), 65.

This movement failed to successfully challenge the British colonial system or unite Bengalis beyond Calcutta. With eastern Bengal's predominantly Muslim population explicitly excluded from the movement, not only were the middle-class voices of the Bengali Muslim population ignored, the goals of the *bhadrolok* did not reflect those of the agrarian classes outside of Calcutta.<sup>35</sup> Rammohun Roy, one of the forefathers of the movement, said the renaissance attempted to counter "several centuries [of] Muhammadan rule" within Hindu India that caused "the civil and religious rights of its original inhabitants being constantly trampled upon" by these Muslims, speaking to its strong exclusionary scope.<sup>36</sup> The shortcomings of this movement in sustaining a legacy beyond Calcutta speaks to how anti-colonial sentiment in India was a shared reality for Hindus and Muslims. However, the interests of the two groups did not complement each other, making it difficult for Bengalis to find a common cause against the British.<sup>37</sup>

To this end, 19<sup>th</sup> century movements to create solidarity among Bengali Muslims took hold as well. As the century progressed, individuals like Haji Shariatullah, Sayyid Ahmad and Karamat Ali emerged as leaders of the Faraizi, Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya, and Taiyuni movements. Each of these movements targeted specific facets of Bengali Muslim reform in what they saw as a non-Muslim state, with Shariatullah and his son, Dudu Miyan, focused on Muslim land ownership, while Ali wished to purge Muslims of the Hindu practices that they had adopted, such as vegetarianism and astrology.<sup>38</sup> These movements centered on the rejection of political and customary institutions that had grown out of the interactions between Hindus and Muslims in

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<sup>35</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 64-65.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Pulak Narayan Dhar, "Bengal Renaissance: A Study in Social Contradictions," *Social Scientist* 15, no. 1 (1987): 29-30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517400>.

<sup>37</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 64-65.

<sup>38</sup> Uddin, 54-56.

Bengal, with the Faraizi addressing economic inequity and Taiyuni tackling the syncretic practices of Bengali Muslims that developed prior to British colonial rule. With the British enterprise enabling Hindu fiscal and theological power to maintain its hold, these movements worked to empower Islam as a source of resistance to both Bengali Hindus and the British.<sup>39</sup> The tensions that came with the British ability to maintain institutions of Bengali Hindu power and push Bengali Muslims to seek power through political means came to fruition during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the 1905 Partition of Bengal, a moment that became a national touchstone for the idea of Muslims in India existing as their own nation.

### *1905 Partition and Fighting Colonialism*

This Hindu and Muslim divide led to the first partition of Bengal along religious lines in 1905. Lord Curzon, viceroy of the colony, began to entertain a potential division of the Bengal province in 1903.<sup>40</sup> A H L Fraser, the lieutenant-governor of the province, argued that the Bengali cities of Dhaka and Mymensingh had become “the hotbed of the purely Bengali movement” that was “unfriendly if not seditious in character.”<sup>41</sup> This desire to separate anti-colonial dissidence in Bengal led Lord Curzon to advocate for the creation of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam by dividing Bengal down the middle. This separated Bengali-language speakers into a Muslim-majority province in the east, and a Hindu-majority province in the west.<sup>42</sup> According to Anil Baran Ray, Lord Curzon explicitly drew upon on Muslim support

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<sup>39</sup> Uddin, 54.

<sup>40</sup> David Arnold, ed., “Introduction: Science, Colonialism and Modernity,” in *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*, The New Cambridge History of India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521563192.002>.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Ray, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Ray, 34-36.

of the partition and disregarded Hindu perspectives.<sup>43</sup> Lord Curzon officially announced the partition on July 20, 1905.<sup>44</sup> With the partition, the area that became Bangladesh merged with the province of Assam to form East Bengal and Assam, a new province with a total population of 38 million.<sup>45</sup>

The partition of 1905 marked the first major division of Bengal with religion as a primary motivating factor, driving major Islamic political mobilization. Nawab Salimullah Bahadur, a political organizer of the Muslim community in Bengal, was a leading force behind the main result of this trend: the creation of the Muslim League.<sup>46</sup> Salimullah wrote that the 1905 Partition “awakened” the “throbbings of a new national life” for Muslims that “went pulsating through the various sections” of the eastern delta of Bengal.<sup>47</sup> Bahadur translated this energy into creating the Muslim League, a political party that looked to capitalize on the new political capital generated by the Bengal partition.<sup>48</sup> In the first meeting the Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906, Muslim League Chairman Nawab Viqar-ul-Malik said that the party sought to build upon the belief that “to protect and advance [Muslim] political rights and interests, it [would] be necessary for them to form their own separate organization.”<sup>49</sup> Chairman Viqar-ul-Malik said that “the commotion

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<sup>43</sup> Ray, 35-36.

<sup>44</sup> David Ludden, “Spatial Inequity and National Territory: Remapping 1905 in Bengal and Assam \*,” *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2012): 489, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000357>.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph E Schwartzberg, Shiva G Bajpai, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 66, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/reference/schwartzberg/toc.html?issue=>.

<sup>46</sup> Nadeem Shafiq Malik, “Formation of the All India Muslim League and Its Response to Some Foreign Issues - 1906 - 1911,” *Journal of Political Studies*, no. XXII (2012).

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan: All-India Muslim League Documents, 1906-1947*. (Karachi: National PubHouse, 1969), 233–35.

<sup>48</sup> Rachel Fell McDermott, ed., *Sources of Indian Traditions*, 3rd ed, Introduction to Asian Civilizations (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 836.

<sup>49</sup> Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan*, 2-5.



caused by the direct and indirect influence of the [Indian] National Congress” during the partition of Bengal inspired the founders of the party.<sup>50</sup> While the broad notions of Islamic representation within colonial India guided the formation of the Muslim League, the creation of

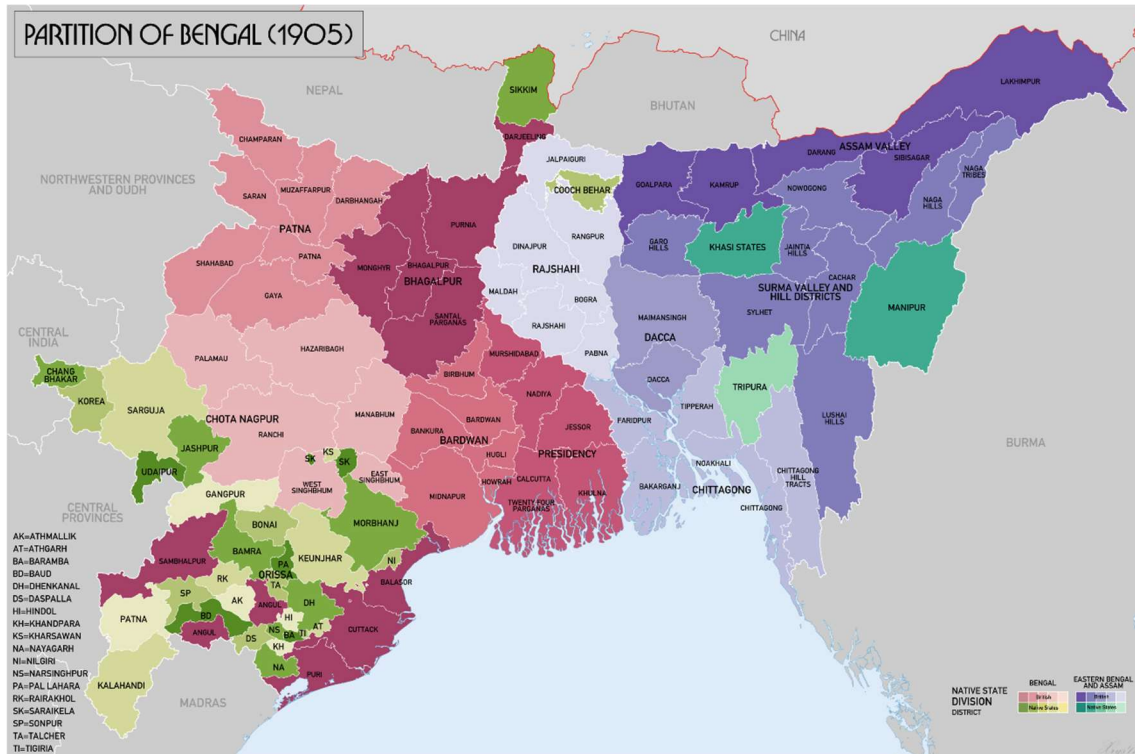


Figure 4: XrysD, File:BengalPartition1905 Map.Png, November 20, 2017, November 20, 2017, Own work, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BengalPartition1905\\_Map.png#metadata](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BengalPartition1905_Map.png#metadata).

the party saw Bengali Muslims capitalizing on Lord Curzon’s decision to politically isolate Muslims in the partition of Bengal. This emphasis on Muslim representation would resonate with both Bengalis and non-Bengalis for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Hindus were less receptive to the terms of the partition. Anil Naran Ray notes how Hindu leaders were not satisfied with what they justifiably perceived as a British plot to pit Hindus and Muslims against one another.<sup>51</sup> In his memoirs, *A Nation in Making: Being the Reminiscences of Fifty Years of Public Life*, Sir Surendranath Banerjee, a Bengali leader in the Indian National

<sup>50</sup> Pirzada, 2-5.

<sup>51</sup> Ray, 39.

Congress, wrote that the partition was “fatal to our political progress and to that close union between Hindus and Mohammedans.” Such divisions hurt “the prospects of the Indian advancement.”<sup>52</sup> Banerjee’s sentiment rested upon the notion of long-standing unity between two groups, a unity that the British had sought to divide through the partition.<sup>53</sup>

To express their opposition to partition, Bengali Hindus led to a boycott of British goods called *Swadeshi*. Banerjee wrote that the “only aim and purpose” of the boycott “was to call the attention of the British public to Bengal’s great grievance” of partition, and the movement managed to become a powerful force against it.<sup>54</sup> British newspapers did not initially take the boycotts seriously, but the oppositional tone that publications took heightened as the movement became more powerful.<sup>55</sup> By using economic means to fight back against the British, Bengali Hindus called on the economic strength of its population. The *Swadeshi* movement spread across colonial India and led to the reversal of the partition in 1911. This decision appeased Hindus who had opposed the partition, but angered Muslims who had benefitted from the creation of the new province.<sup>56</sup>

In dividing Bengal, the British consciously pitted Bengali Hindus and Muslims against each other. The British exploited differences between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal that stretched the unity brought through language, anti-colonial sentiment, or common history as a shared foundation for the Bengal region. With the partition’s reversal in 1911, the British made it clear that supporting Bengali Muslims was not the absolute priority the colonial regime, but rather supporting British economic interests and defense of the permanent settlement system that

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<sup>52</sup> Surendranath Banerjee, *A Nation in the Making* (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1925), 188, <http://library.bjp.org/jspui/handle/123456789/173>.

<sup>53</sup> Sir Surendranath Banerjee, *Speeches of Surendra Nath Banerjee* (Indian Association, 1970), 48–50., quoted in McDermott, 195-96

<sup>54</sup> Banerjee, *A Nation in the Making*, 171-174, 176, 178, 181-183, quoted in McDermott, 270.

<sup>55</sup> Ray, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Ray, 36.

propped up the colonial apparatus. Even if defending these economic interests did not deal directly with issues of identity, the maintenance of those interests still relied on the affluent, especially the primarily Hindu *zamindars* who facilitated the agrarian lives of Bengali Muslims. The shifting interests of the two sides in Bengal were emblematic of the wider tides that were taking shape at the intersection of religion and political interests within colonial India.

### *Creating Pakistan*

In 1912, Nawab Salimullah Bahadur addressed the Muslim League about the reversal of the partition. Aware of the benefits that the partition brought to Bengali, Bahadur insisted that the willingness of the British government to turn its back on Bengali Muslims was a “deprivation of those splendid opportunities at self-improvement” that Bengali Muslims had achieved with the partition.<sup>57</sup> To him, the Bengali losses from the reversal of the partition were a loss for all Muslims in India, and these losses define its mission moving forward. As the Muslim League adjusted to this new political reality, Bengal’s Fazlul Huq took charge of the party in 1914 and shifted its focus towards addressing the needs of less wealthy Muslims in Bengal.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the emergence of political differences between Muslims and Hindus in India, the two groups worked together to advance their shared interests in the Lucknow Pact of 1916.<sup>59</sup> An agreement between the Indian National Congress and Muslim League parties to cooperate, the Lucknow Pact promised adequate representation for Hindus and Muslims in colonial legislative councils. The pact specified that “adequate provision should be made for the representation of important minorities” within legislative councils, including a specification that Muslims would

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Pirzada, *Foundations of Pakistan*, 233–37.

<sup>58</sup> McDermott, 836.

<sup>59</sup> McDermott, 837.

be allotted 40% of the Bengal Provincial Council.<sup>60</sup> While this pact was rooted in Hindu-Muslim cooperation, this allocation was controversial, because Bengal's population at this point was about 54% Muslim.<sup>61</sup> This underrepresentation of Muslims in Bengal exacerbated the existing cultural and economic inequities that had provoked issues in the region throughout colonial rule.<sup>62</sup>

Even with this unstable foundation, Hindus and Muslims in Bengal spent almost a decade seeking to work together.<sup>63</sup> The Bengal Pact of 1923 addressed “the rights of each community when the foundation of Self-Government” within the province. The pact established that 55% of government positions in the province would go to Muslims, while representation in local legislative bodies would “be in the proportion of 60 to 40 in every district”, with the majority religion receiving 60% representation.<sup>64</sup> This pact speaks to how longstanding cooperation between the two sides was not necessarily engrained within any unified Bengal identity, but was rather rooted in a need to legally protect the rights of each side. For the law to serve as the institution necessary to protect religious cooperation and representation was a sign that it was not a natural component of Bengali cooperation, speaking to the continued fracturing between Bengali Muslim and Bengali Hindu interests over the course of British colonial rule.

Through this antipathy towards Hindu and Muslim unity in Bengal, the nature of the Muslim coalition inside India shifted significantly. Fazlul Huq, no longer in charge of the Muslim League, formed the Krishak Proja Party (KPP) in 1928. The Krishak Proja Party, which

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<sup>60</sup> T. r Thesar, *Report Of The 31 Indian National Congress*, 1917, 77–78, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.146036>.

<sup>61</sup> McDermott, 436.

<sup>62</sup> McDermott, 837.

<sup>63</sup> McDermott, 837.

<sup>64</sup> H. N. Mitra, *The Indian Quarterly Register Vol. 1 (1924)*, 1924, 63–64, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.45421>., quoted in McDermott, 472-73

translates to the “peasant tenant party”, looked to derive support from the agrarian Bengalis.<sup>65</sup> Huq advocated the eradication of the permanent settlement system, a position that attracted garnered support from a predominantly Muslim and agrarian faction of voters.<sup>66</sup> This message apparently resonated with Bengali Muslim voters in 1937, when the KPP won the majority of Muslim votes within Bengal.<sup>67</sup> Huq joined forces with Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a leader who pressed for the creation of Pakistan, in 1941.<sup>68</sup> Both leaders and their respective parties formed a coalition in the Bengal Legislative Assembly after this election, integrating Jinnah into the fold of Bengali Muslim politics.<sup>69</sup>

Jinnah had articulated his vision for Muslims in India, including Bengal, during a 1940 speech to the Muslim League. In his speech, Jinnah recommended that the only way for the British government “to secure [the] peace and happiness of the people of [the] subcontinent” was to allow “Muslim India and Hindu India” to exist at two separate nations. He suggested that Hindus and Muslims “[belonged] to two different religious philosophies, social customs, [and] literatures”, and that uniting two groups under one democratic system would do harm to Indian Muslims. The thrust of his proposal, known as the Lahore Resolution, rested upon a constructed understanding of the relationships between Muslims and Hindus in India, where the “artificial unity of India [dated] back only to the British conquest” and is only in place “by the British bayonet”.<sup>70</sup> Huq aligned with Jinnah’s vision when address the Indian National Congress party in

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<sup>65</sup> McDermott, 837.

<sup>66</sup> Sana Aiyar, “Fazlul Huq, Region and Religion in Bengal: The Forgotten Alternative of 1940–43,” *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (November 2008): 1217–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X07003022>.

<sup>67</sup> Khan, 842.

<sup>68</sup> David Ludden, “The Politics of Independence in Bangladesh,” *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2011, 80.

<sup>69</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103.

<sup>70</sup> Mahomed Ali Jinnah and Jamal al-Din Ahmad, *Some Recent Speeches and Writings of Mr. Jinnah* (Lahore; [V. 1, 1952: S.M. Ashraf, 1947), 174–80 in McDermott, *Sources of Indian Traditions*, 500–503.

1940.<sup>71</sup> He said that “Mussalmans of India [would] not consent to any such scheme” that does not “take the Muslim feelings into consideration”.<sup>72</sup> This stance reflects the intersection where Bengal’s agrarian and Muslim political interests lie, with the leader of an agrarian party stretching his support for a policy based in religious affiliation above all else.

With this vision of Bengal’s fate out in the open, Bengali Muslim and Indian reactions to Jinnah’s two-nation theory encompassed the differing perspectives of religion and national identity. Huq had long resented Jinnah’s desire to exert himself and his theory of Islam in politics as emblematic of Bengali Muslims. This tension with Jinnah led to [who] removing Huq and the KPP from the Muslim League coalition.<sup>73</sup> The result was a direct competition between the two parties, whose methods of attracting Bengali Muslim support differed. Huq’s Krishak Proja Party acknowledged the multi-layered identities of Bengali Muslims by downplaying the Bengali Muslim connection to Islam. Jinnah revitalized the Muslim League’s vision of representing the Muslim people of India, and he held Islam ever tighter to this developing vision of national identity.<sup>74</sup>

Bengal’s 1946 provincial elections served as a referendum on these questions within Bengal. The Muslim League had resounding control of Muslim seats within India’s Central Assembly, holding all 30 of the elected positions allocated to Muslims within this body.<sup>75</sup> Results in Bengal provided similar results to the broader Indian elections, with the Muslim League winning 113 of the 119 Muslim seats in the province.<sup>76</sup> These victories assured Jinnah and the

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<sup>71</sup> Aiyar, 1218-1219

<sup>72</sup> nripendra Nath Mitra, *Indian Annual Register, 1940, Vol.1*, 1940, 312, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.93700>.

<sup>73</sup> McDermott, 837-38.

<sup>74</sup> Aiyar, 1217.

<sup>75</sup> W. W. J., “The Indian Elections — 1946,” *The World Today* 2, no. 4 (1946): 168-169.

<sup>76</sup> Philip Oldenburg, “‘A Place Insufficiently Imagined’: Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (August 1985): 720, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2056443>.

Muslim League of the power to create a separate nation for Indian Muslims, implicitly affirming the Muslim League's willingness to combine religion and politics among Bengali Muslims. Zillur Khan argues that Bengali Muslims aligning with Muslim League speaks to the fears that they had about the power of Bengali Hindus. Bengali leaders, including Huq, proposed the creation of United Bengal province within India, which brought up concerns of a future under Hindu subjugation akin to Bengali Muslim circumstances in British India.<sup>77</sup> The Hindu-majority in the western half of Bengal echoed the Muslim desire for a religious partition. Indeed, by 1947, Hindu opinion had shifted in favor of the separation of Bengal along religious lines, with a poll published in an English-language newspaper, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, showing that 98.3% of Bengalis believed that Bengali Hindus should have their own homeland.<sup>78</sup>

Beyond Bengal, Jinnah's insistence on two nations was not lost upon those who did not want to see Bengal split in two. World War II had accelerated the timeline of Britain's plan for leaving India and the Muslim League and Indian National Congress were embroiled in negotiating the terms of this departure.<sup>79</sup> Negotiations in 1946 led to the rejection of proposals for a unified India, forcing the British to accept the idea of a partition.<sup>80</sup> Despite the seeming inevitability of partition in 1947, Sarat Chandra Bose led a group of Hindu politicians who worked with Bengali Muslim League leaders H.S. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim to create a "United and Sovereign Bengal". The proposal promised to give adequate power to both Hindus and Muslims in this new independent state, but it did not gain major traction as Bengal continued

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<sup>77</sup> Khan, 842.

<sup>78</sup> Haimanti Roy, "A Partition of Contingency? Public Discourse in Bengal, 1946-1947," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (2009): 1355-56.

<sup>79</sup> John Springhall, *Decolonization since 1945: The Collapse of European Overseas Empires*, Repr., Studies in Contemporary History (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 66-67.

<sup>80</sup> Springhall, 69-70.

its path towards religious partition.<sup>81</sup> In July 1947, the British charged Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British official with no direct connection to the British India administration, to lead a commission that would determine the boundaries of a post-British subcontinent.<sup>82</sup>

On August 17, 1947, the British released the results of Radcliffe's commission, which recommended splitting Bengal in half.<sup>83</sup> The eastern half of Bengal would become part of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, making up 56% of that country's population.<sup>84</sup> The partition displaced about 12.5 million people, 1.5 million of these people being Hindus who fled East Bengal to go to India.<sup>85</sup> The scale of this human migration suggests how strong religious identification had become in Bengal. Over the first half of the century, the de facto unity among Hindus and Muslims in Bengal had turned into a refugee migration. This displacement reflects a physical, political, socioeconomic and cultural line had always implicitly existed between Hindu-majority Bengal and Muslim-majority Bengal. But, the 1947 partition served as a moment where any supposed unity brought by language, cross-religious interaction, and shared history became secondary to the importance of religion, political party, and economic class. These latter three markers became emblematic of the kind of Bengali that one was, and most of East Bengal elected to emphasize their agrarian, Muslim roots, to support Jinnah's Muslim League and its push for partition.

The Islamic political mobilization that the 1905 partition of Bengal provoked established the foundation for the 1947 partition. The formal rhetorical denunciations of the Bengal Hindu

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<sup>81</sup> Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 260.

<sup>82</sup> Joya Chatterji, "The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52," *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (1999): 186.

<sup>83</sup> Springhall, 71.

<sup>84</sup> Mubashar Hasan, "The Diverse Roots of the 'Secular' in East Pakistan (1947-71) and the Crisis of 'Secularism' in Contemporary Bangladesh," *History and Sociology of South Asia* 11, no. 2 (July 2017): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2230807517703721>.

<sup>85</sup> Springhall, 73-74.



link to the colonial enterprise sparked resentment among Bengali Muslims, who countered it with varying levels of religious fervor, socioeconomic mobilization. In the end, this two-pronged legacy of the colonial experience led Bengali Muslims to align with Muhammad Ali Jinnah's plan for separate Islamic and Hindu states. The 1947 partition marked a partial reclamation of the Bengali Muslim province that existed after the 1905 partition and sparked a desire for political mobilization to regain that independence. However, East Bengal soon began to retreat from its embrace of religion to press for Pakistan's creation. For the next two and a half decades, Bengali Muslims constructed a new sense of national identity that looked to the rhetoric and language of those who they had rejected earlier in the century.

## Chapter 2: From Bengali to Bangladesh

Nearly twenty years after the partition of British India, Pakistan and India went to war with each other over the disputed territories of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>1</sup> During this war, Pakistan, which was under martial law, sought ways to unify the country in support for Pakistan against India. To achieve this, the Pakistani government banned broadcasting content that had “Indian origin”, leading to the eradication of this content from public radio and state television outlets. This ban led these outlets to stop broadcasting works by Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali Hindu writer and intellectual whose works flourished during Calcutta’s Bengal Renaissance in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While the government reinstated his works after the end of the war, Pakistan’s minister of information and broadcasting directed Pakistan’s media outlets to stop airing Tagore’s works just two years later. While Tagore’s association with India rendered his work to be of “Indian origin”, the country’s decision to ban his works upset Bengalis in Pakistan, with a letter in Pakistani newspapers stating that Tagore was “an integral part of the cultural existence of the Bengali-speaking Pakistanis” in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the Bengal Renaissance and its *bhadrolok* did not actively incorporate Bengali Muslim perspectives within its framework during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the fact that Bengali Muslims in the 1960s actively protested the banning of a Hindu, Bengal Renaissance thinker reflects the drastic shift in how Bengali Muslims negotiated their relationship between religion and politics. Pakistan’s formation in 1947 marked a moment where Bengali Muslims in eastern Bengal, along with British colonial powers, chose religion as a defining element of their new nation. Before Pakistan adopted its own constitution, an amended

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<sup>1</sup> Sumit Ganguly, “Wars without End: The Indo-Pakistani Conflict,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 541 (1995): 169–72.

<sup>2</sup> Anisuzzaman, “Claiming and Disclaiming a Cultural Icon: Tagore in East Pakistan and Bangladesh,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (October 2008): 1060-63, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.77.4.1058>.

version of the colonial-era Government of India, 1935, served as the state's governing doctrine. Under this law, a Governor General would serve as the country's head of state. The Governor General, who was originally Muhammad Ali Jinnah upon the country's formation, would lead the central government while the Constituent Assembly simultaneously served as the framers of the constitution and the parliament of the country. The Constituent Assembly ran under a federal system, where each province would have its own elected legislative assembly, with a governor appointed by the Governor General. Along with this legislative body, the Governor General appointed a Prime Minister, who oversaw a cabinet in charge of administering the state. Within this arrangement, the Muslim League, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was the prominent party in the Constituent Assembly, serving as Pakistan's legislators and constitutional framers.<sup>3</sup> The creation of Pakistan brought together two, Muslim-majority populations that faced multiple handicaps in their ability to form a cohesive nation.

Despite the united pretenses of Pakistan's formation, the dissonance that existed beyond religion between East Bengal and the other half of Pakistan became clear early, with the status of Bengali as a state language serving as the original point of contention between the two halves of the nation. Bengali Muslims used their fight for Bengali as a state language of the country to address broad foundations of economic and political inequity between Bengalis and non-Bengalis in Pakistan during the early 50s. This conflict heightened as Pakistan struggled to build a unified, stable state amidst Bengali nationalist political mobilization, leading to the military seizing control of Pakistan's government. It wasn't until the 60s when Bengalis turned their political grievances into calls for greater autonomy from Pakistan, using cultural narratives about

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<sup>3</sup> Ardath W. Burks, "Constitution-Making in Pakistan," *Political Science Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1954): 545–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2145636>.

figures like Tagore to separate Bengalis from Pakistan's emphasis on Islam as a unifying foundation for the nation.

The need to deemphasize religion to earn political and social capital among Bengali Muslims defined East Pakistan's experience while part of Pakistan. While East and West Pakistan had a shared connection to Islam, it did not forge unity between these two distinct regions. Not only did each half's longstanding relationship with Islam differ from the other half's, but Bengali Muslims began to envision themselves as a separate group, using a shared constructed national expression through authors like Tagore to construct a new vision of East Bengal as its own nation. Political parties formed to capitalize on these differentiating ties, the most prominent of which being the Awami League. The party's platform shifted from supporting Bengali Muslims within Pakistan to rejecting the premise of unity between the two halves altogether. These efforts culminated in the Awami League winning a majority in Pakistan's first parliamentary election after a stint under martial law, but the government's unwillingness to allow the party to form a parliament led to the declaration and realization of Bangladesh's independence in 1971.<sup>4</sup>

### *Understanding Bengali Nationalism in Pakistan*

Differences between how the eastern and western halves of Pakistan complicated Muhammad Ali Jinnah's push to create "a national home and a national state" for Muslims in British India.<sup>5</sup> As opposed to a syncretic conversion process rooted in both proximity to Hinduism and ethnic homogeneity that took shape in Bengal, Pakistan's western half was geographically closer to the diverse array of empires that made their way to Bengal through the

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<sup>4</sup> David Ludden, "The Politics of Independence in Bangladesh," *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2011, 79.

<sup>5</sup> The National Archives, "The National Archives - Homepage," text, Speech by Muhammad Jinnah on the partition of Bengal and the Punjab, May 4, 1947, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/the-road-to-partition/jinnah-partition/>.

Muslim-majority parts of South Asia. Jinnah emphasized Urdu as a unifying force for Indian Muslims, with its Persian script bringing that relationship even closer to the broader Islamic community, as opposed to Bengali's Sanskrit script.<sup>6</sup> Given Urdu's origins as the Islamic derivation of the Hindustani language, the language gained religious legitimacy from its use of the Arabic script, utility as a language to discuss religious matters, and history as a language for Muslim rulers in the region.<sup>7</sup> However, Urdu was not widely spoken in Bengal, but both Hindus and Muslims in Bengal spoke Bengali, its presence in the region served as a binding element for all people of Bengal, independent of religion. Given these tensions, Jinnah's insistence on using language to join the Muslims of East and West Pakistan was the foundation for one of the first major points of tension between these two sides early in the nation's history.

Jinnah announced his intention to make Urdu the state language of Pakistan during his first visit to East Bengal in March 1948. He said that students in Bengal should focus on "unity and solidarity" instead of the facing the consequences of divisiveness that debating language and cultural identity would cause. Jinnah noted that questions of language "[created] disruption among the Musalmans", and that continued debate would prevent the nation from "[remaining] tied up solidly together and [functioning]" effectively. While he conceded that it "[was] a matter for the elected representatives of the people" of East Bengal to decide whether Bengali should be its official language, he stated that the state's only official language would be Urdu, and that those who believed otherwise were "the enemy of Pakistan."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Oldenburg, "'A Place Insufficiently Imagined': Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (August 1985): 716, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2056443>.

<sup>7</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 168-72.

<sup>8</sup> Waheed Ahmad, *The Nation's Voice, Vol. VII: Launching the State and the End of the Journey (Aug. 1947 - Sept. 1948)* (Karachi, 2003). Quoted in "Txt\_jinnah\_dacca\_1948," accessed October 8, 2018, [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt\\_jinnah\\_dacca\\_1948.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt_jinnah_dacca_1948.html).

Bengali Muslims did not react well to Jinnah's declaration. In a meeting with East Bengali officials opposing his declaration of Urdu as the country's state language during his 1948 visit, Jinnah argued that having a single state language was essential to creating a "stable government" in Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this, during Jinnah's push for the state of Pakistan, he argued that Urdu was a linguistic tent pole of the "distinctive culture and civilization, language and literature" of the Indian Muslim nation.<sup>10</sup> Even though only 3.5% of Pakistan's population natively spoke Urdu, Jinnah wished to use it as a tool of linguistic unity across the ethnically diverse, religiously homogenous, nation.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Bengali's Sanskrit script and strong connection to Bengali Hindus made it easier to treat Bengali as somehow less Islamic than Urdu, given its Persian script and connection to the Muslim stronghold of West Pakistan. The fact that 56% of Pakistan's population spoke Bengali played to the argument of it being more emblematic of Pakistan, though this Bengali-speaking majority centered on East Pakistan. On top of this, with middle class East Pakistanis being educated in Bengali, the exclusive use of Urdu would disadvantage both those educated in Bengali, along with poorer Bengalis who may not have been literate altogether.<sup>12</sup>

The formation of the Awami Muslim League in 1949 was one response to the debate over language.<sup>13</sup> The new party's seven-point platform focused on economic and political concerns, including "abolition of [the] Zamindari system" and the desire to have an "immediate general election in the province" that was open to all adults. Along with these points, the party's platform

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<sup>9</sup> Oldenburg, 717.

<sup>10</sup> Oldenburg, 717.

<sup>11</sup> Zaglul Haider, "A Revisit to the Indian Role in the Bangladesh Liberation War," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 5 (October 2009): 538, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909609340062>.

<sup>12</sup> Ali Riaz, *Unfolding State: The Transformation of Bangladesh* (Whitby, ON: de Sitter Publications, 2005), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 182.

also pursued the “recognition of Bengali as a State language.”<sup>14</sup> Placing language alongside goals like land reform and jute nationalization transformed Bengali language into a tool of state egalitarianism, or Sonar Bangla, as much as it was a product of linguistically rooted national identity.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the party considered its goals of a provincial election and recognition of Bengali as a state language within the existence of a broader Pakistani state speaks to how Bengali Muslims did not reject the premise of Pakistan. Rather, it served as evidence that the party’s push for these uniquely Bengali Muslim goals was not antithetical to the original goals of Pakistan.

Language returned to the forefront in 1952, with Khwaja Nazimuddin serving as Pakistan’s prime minister.<sup>16</sup> On January 26, the Muslim League declared that Urdu would be Pakistan’s state language. In response, Bengali Muslims organized a day of pro-Bengali language protest planned for February 21, a day known as State Language Day.<sup>17</sup> As plans for these protests came together, Pakistan’s government banned the publication of the *Pakistan Observer of Dhaka*, the most prominent English newspaper in East Pakistan, after the publication of an editorial called “Crypto Fascism” that criticized Nazimuddin’s regime.<sup>18</sup> Doubling down on repression, the government also banned all protest in the country on February 21, but protests went on as scheduled on that day.<sup>19</sup> On the day of the protests, according to *The New York Times*, Pakistani police opened fire on 7,000 protesters, primarily students, who protested peacefully in

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<sup>14</sup> Md Islam and Md Islam, “Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh: Contesting the Dominant Narratives,” *Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (March 3, 2018): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7030037>.

<sup>15</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Yasmeen Yousif Pardesi, “An Analysis of the Constitutional Crisis in Pakistan (1958-1969),” *The Dialogue* 7, no. 4 (2012): 378.

<sup>17</sup> Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*, Islamic Civilization & Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 125.

<sup>18</sup> “EAST PAKISTAN PAPER IS BANNED BY REGIME,” accessed January 23, 2019, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1952/02/15/84302564.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Uddin, 125.

Dhaka. The newspaper reported that the chancellor of the university said that “students had been peaceful and had remained of [Dacca] Medical College” as they were told.<sup>20</sup> The protests led to the death of four students.<sup>21</sup> On top of this, many of the other protesters were either injured or arrested.

The Bengali Language Movement was the first major flashpoint where Bengali notions of identification came into conflict with Pakistan’s vision of a Muslim homeland. East Bengal’s urban middle class, educated in Bengali, formed the backbone of the movement. Urdu’s long association with the aristocracy dates back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic intellectual culture. The language never permeated among the mostly rural, uneducated Muslims of Bengal.<sup>22</sup> During this time, these peasants in Bengal faced a food crisis and drop in jute prices. While the issues of these two social classes did not directly relate to each other, the Language Movement integrated this angry agrarian front within the movement, arguing that Pakistan’s language policies had inhibited the well-being of all Bengalis.<sup>23</sup>

February 21 soon became known as Shaheed Dibash, or simply Ekushey, and served as a day of remembrance for those who fought for the Bengali language.<sup>24</sup> Subsequent remembrances of the protests centered on ideas espoused in poems like Abdul Gaffar Chaudhuri’s “Amar Bhaier Rakte Rangano”. This poem notes that February 21 “was reddened by my brother’s blood.” Although Pakistanis targeted these Bengali-speaking “mothers, sisters, and brothers” and “[crushing] the breast of Bengal underfoot”, Chaudhuri notes that “[Bengalis] shall once again

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<sup>20</sup> “6 Slain in 2-Day Rioting in East Pakistan;,” accessed February 10, 2019, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1952/02/23/92663250.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Fell McDermott, ed., *Sources of Indian Traditions*, 3rd ed, Introduction to Asian Civilizations (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 840.

<sup>22</sup> Uddin, 60

<sup>23</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 59.

<sup>24</sup> Uddin, 125-26.



fire up the month of February with [their] anger's intense heat", Such poems constitution a call of unity for those Bengalis whose "food, clothing, [and] peace of man" was "snatched away" by Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> This poem and others connects the fight for language to broader efforts to resist economic and political exploitation by the Pakistani state. Visions of unity like the one that Chaudhuri constructs use Bengal as a geographic, emotional and physical construct where the defense of language and shared community was more important than other identity markers. This logic carried itself to the rhetoric that Bengali Muslim leaders used when invoking the protests of 1952 as a pivotal moment on Bangladesh's path to creation.

### *New Constitutions and Mounting Tensions*

In 1954, East Bengal's Constituent Assembly was up for election. With the Bengali Language Movement gaining ground among Bengali Muslims, these elections affirmed the intersecting social and economic interests that brought the fight for linguistic nationalism to the forefront. In these elections, the Awami Muslim League joined forces with the Krishak Sramik Party (KSP) and few other smaller parties to form what was known as the United Front. This coalition challenged the Muslim League and brought the distinct linguistic and state goals of the Awami League together with the agrarian-centric goals of Fazlul Huq's KSP.<sup>26</sup> This coalition served as a crucial entry point for the unique tenets of Bengali nationalism in East Bengal and across Pakistan, alarming those who feared further backlash from Bengali Muslims towards the Pakistani project.

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Qazi Abdul Mannan and Clinton B. Seely, *Lyric Poetry* (New York: Learning Resources in International Studies, 1974), 17–18. in McDermott, 840-841.

<sup>26</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 59.

The new United Front adopted what was called the Twenty-One Point Program to counter the Muslim League campaign in East Pakistan.<sup>27</sup> This platform included some of the Awami League's original goals, including the nationalization of the jute industry and the establishment of Bengali as one of Pakistan's state language, but expanded upon both goals. The coalition's platform included agrarian reform goals that stretched beyond jute to include salt, irrigation, co-operative farming and labor rights. This reflected the non-religious, economically oriented roots of the Krishak Sramik Party and original Awami League platform, and supplemented these goals with distinct calls to the linguistic forces behind Bengali nationalism. Three separate points in the program dealt with the Language Movement, including the creation of a "research institute of Bengali language and literature," a "martyrs' monument to commemorate the sacred memory of those who gave their lives for the Bengali language and literature," along with the recognition of February 21 as a public holiday.<sup>28</sup>

Aspiration for economic and linguistic justice speak to the holistic political and Bengali Muslim goals of the United Front. The Twenty-One Point Program did not reject the Islamic basis of Pakistan's nationhood. Along with recognizing that the coalition would not pass any items that were "repugnant to the fundamental principles of Holy Quran and Sunnah," the platform recognized the role of the Pakistani state in the "defense, foreign affairs, and currency" of the country.<sup>29</sup> These aspirations aligned with how Pakistan had envisioned itself as a Muslim state, but were skeptical of how strong the central Pakistani government would be in the administration of Bengali Muslims. This questioning of the united Muslim homeland that Jinnah

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<sup>27</sup> W. Norman Brown, *The United States and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh*, [3d ed.], The American Foreign Policy Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 275.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in A. K. M. Shamsul Huda, *The Constitution of Bangladesh* (Rita Court, 1997), 69–71. in McDermott, 842-843.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Huda, 69-71. in McDermott, 842-843.

sought worked for the United Front, as it won 233 of the 309 seats in the East Bengal assembly, compared to the 10 seats won by the Muslim League.<sup>30</sup>

The architects of Pakistan's constitution did not embrace the United Front's victory. In October, Ghulam Mohammad, Governor-General of Pakistan declared a state of emergency that dissolved the country's Constituent Assembly on the grounds of a so-called "political crisis" in Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> This emergency declaration nullified the United Front's ability to form an assembly, undoing the landslide results from earlier in the year. Even without a constitution allowing it to govern, the Awami Muslim League removed "Muslim" from its name in 1955. The change reflected a separation that Bengali Muslim politicians were willing to make between their religious disposition and their social and economic goals.<sup>32</sup> This separation that was antithetical to Jinnah's vision of a united Indian Muslim bound by religion and aspects of national identity.

On March 23, 1956, Pakistan ratified its first constitution. The new constitution created an "Islamic Republic" with a central parliament, and independent legislative bodies in the provinces of East Pakistan, formally East Bengal, and West Pakistan. The nation committed itself to practicing "democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice as *enunciated by Islam*."<sup>33</sup> With the ratification of the 1956 constitution, Pakistan laid the foundation of an Islamic state and rejected the Awami Leagues demand that Bengali language, and Bengali culture by extension, would help define Pakistan. Along with these Islamic principles, the Constitution also

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<sup>30</sup> Brown, 275.

<sup>31</sup> "PAKISTAN ASSEMBLY DISSOLUTION DECREE," *Townsville Daily Bulletin (Qld. : 1907 - 1954)*, October 25, 1954.

<sup>32</sup> Schendel, 117.

<sup>33</sup> G. W. Choudhury, "The Constitution of Pakistan," *Pacific Affairs* 29, no. 3 (1956): 243–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2753474>.

established the nature of legislative and executive power. The ruling government in the National Assembly would choose a prime minister, while the assembly itself would select a president.<sup>34</sup>

The Muslim League, in addition to losing its footing to the United Front in East Bengal's 1954 elections, had struggled to maintain power in the years after Pakistan's establishment.<sup>35</sup> Without a strong leader to lead it amidst worsening economic circumstances, the party did not have significant traction to build support from.<sup>36</sup> One month after the Constitution was ratified, Dr. Khan Sahib split from the Muslim League and formed his own party, the Republican Party, after the League denied his nomination to serve as the country's Chief Minister.<sup>37</sup> In September 1956, the Awami League formed a parliamentary coalition with the new Republican Party. This coalition appointed Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy as the only Bengali prime minister in Pakistan's history.<sup>38</sup> Suhrawardy was a well-known figure in partition-era Bengal.<sup>39</sup> While Suhrawardy would serve as prime minister, General Iskander Mirza was appointed as the first president of Pakistan.<sup>40</sup>

Suhrawardy's term as prime minister was short and his record mixed. One notable victory of the Suhrawardy era was the establishment of the Bengali as an official state language.<sup>41</sup> He promised to unify Pakistan in a political and literal sense, by promoting unity amongst Pakistani electorates and attempting to combine the electorate of Pakistan together, instead of in two

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<sup>34</sup> Choudhury, 248.

<sup>35</sup> Pardesi, 377.

<sup>36</sup> Pardesi, 377.

<sup>37</sup> Dilara Choudhury, *Constitutional Development in Bangladesh: Stresses and Strains* (Karachi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 250.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, 276.

<sup>39</sup> Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Mohammad H. R. Talukdar, *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy with a Brief Account of His Life and Work* (Dhaka: University Press, 1987), 21, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002213563>.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, 232-33.

<sup>41</sup> Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 7.

halves.<sup>42</sup> Suhrawardy insisted that Pakistan's "prestige [was] founded on the sense of unity" between the two halves of Pakistan.<sup>43</sup> To this end, while he pursued actions of equality like increasing the allocation of economic aid to East Pakistan, he also accused East Pakistanis of cultivating a divided culture within Pakistan, speaking to his faith in Pakistan as a single unit that could stand together.<sup>44</sup>

Despite these efforts towards unity, he did not have enough support from the rest of his government to pursue this mission. The constitution stipulated that the president would oppose the prime minister unless he or she believed the prime minister was inadequately representing the National Assembly.<sup>45</sup> Despite this, Mirza pushed against Suhrawardy's approach towards leadership, as he did not trust the base of support he had in East Pakistan with the Awami League.<sup>46</sup> This pressure came to head on October 11, 1957, when he resigned as prime minister after the Republican Party surrendered its support for its coalition with the Awami League. Suhrawardy affirmed that the Awami League "would have nothing to do with any attempt by the President to form a [Muslim] League government."<sup>47</sup> The Republican Party unwillingness to support Suhrawardy reflects the hesitation of non-Bengali politicians to embrace a united nation. Even with the expressed support for a united nation by a Bengali prime minister from East Pakistan, leaders like Mirza did not trust the unification and political differentiation of East

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<sup>42</sup> Rizwan Ullah Kokab and Mahboob Hussain, "National Integration of Pakistan: An Assessment of Political Leadership of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy.(Essay)," *Journal of Political Studies*, no. XXXI (2017): 2-5.

<sup>43</sup> Muhammad Thuthaal, "HUSEYN SHAHEED SUHRAWARDY- AND UNITED PAKISTAN," *Defence Journal* 15, no. 12 (2012): B1-8.

<sup>44</sup> Kokab and Hussain, 2-5.

<sup>45</sup> Choudhury, 248.

<sup>46</sup> Thuthaal, B1-8.

<sup>47</sup> AP and The Times of India News Service, "MR. SUHRAWARDY RESIGNS PAK PREMIERSHIP: Sequel To Split Over Republican Demands LEAGUE CHIEF ASKED TO FORM GOVT," *The Times of India (1861-Current); Mumbai, India*, October 12, 1957.

Bengal, reflecting a fracture in Pakistan's support for the Bengali Muslims who expressed an allegiance towards the nation just a decade earlier.

After the fall of Suhrawardy, President Mirza suspended the 1956 constitution in October 1958 and established himself as the leader of the country. He passed a law that declared that the country, "known henceforward as Pakistan" rather than the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, would still "be governed as nearly as may be in accordance with the late Constitution", but under "any order of the President or regulation of the President or regulation made by the Chief Administrator of Martial Law."<sup>48</sup> Mirza remained president, and he appointed Ayub Khan to the latter position, putting him in charge of the country's military. However, Khan did not plan to cooperate with Mirza during this state of martial law, stating that Mirza's "authority [was] a revolution" and that he had "no sanction in law or constitution." On October 27, Khan, who had become prime minister at this point, removed Mirza from his position as president, and made himself the top leader in Pakistan's new martial law state.<sup>49</sup> Increasing tensions throughout the 60s made it harder for Bengali Muslims to co-exist with Pakistan. These difficulties from merely grievances at the beginning of the 60s into prominent calls to create a new nation by the end of the decade.

### *Bracing for Impact*

Despite all the problems that had arisen between Bengali Muslims and the Pakistani government, Bengali Muslims were still willing to align themselves with the Pakistani project. In a 1963-64 survey, Howard Schuman, a sociologist from the University of Michigan, interviewed

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<sup>48</sup> "ARCHIVES: Laws Order, 1958," accessed February 7, 2019, <http://pakistan.space.tripod.com/archives/58law.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> Khalid B. Sayeed, "Martial Law Administration in Pakistan," *Far Eastern Survey* 28, no. 5 (1959): 74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3024211>.

1,001 young men in East Pakistan to determine which identity markers they associated with. Schuman found that 48% of respondents thought of themselves as Pakistani, while only 11% saw themselves as just Bengali.<sup>50</sup> The remaining 42% of respondents associated primarily with their district or village, as opposed to either national identity. Interestingly, the survey found a statistically significant correlation between one's literacy level and one's identification with Pakistan. Schuman concluded that "[learning] political identity in school and through newspapers" invoked perspectives that were sympathetic to Pakistani nationalism.<sup>51</sup> While Bengali Muslims faced political and economic inequality as part of Pakistan, the results of this survey speak to the existing belief in the Pakistani project. Even with the tensions over language and East Pakistani autonomy, Bengalis in the early '60s were still willing to align themselves with the Pakistani project. Even though questions of language and Pakistani support for Bengalis became prominent points of debate in the country, Bengali Muslims were still willing to put their support behind the Pakistani project. It was not until later in the 60s when the Awami League and Bengali Muslims confronted these disparities as the country moved towards its path to independence.

By the mid-60s, however, inequality amongst Bengalis in East Pakistan and the rest of the country became clearer. Between 1955-56 and 1964-65, 70% of the 3,678.8 million rupees that Pakistan spent on civil support was directed towards West Pakistan. From 1947 to 1970, 80% of the foreign aid and two-thirds of the country's imports went to West Pakistan.<sup>52</sup>

Inequities like these epitomized how East Pakistan's differences with Pakistan stretched beyond

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<sup>50</sup> Howard Schuman, "A Note on the Rapid Rise of Mass Bengali Nationalism in East Pakistan," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 2 (1972): 290–95.

<sup>51</sup> Schuman, 293–95.

<sup>52</sup> Mubashar Hasan, "The Diverse Roots of the 'Secular' in East Pakistan (1947–71) and the Crisis of 'Secularism' in Contemporary Bangladesh," *History and Sociology of South Asia* 11, no. 2 (July 2017): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2230807517703721>

national identity. Unique notions of Bengali national identity developed during the '60s, and these conceptions were a response to the differences between the two sides with respect to ethnicity, language, and other cultural identity markers. While the demands of the fight for language intersected with the state apparatus, the 60s saw other differentiators between East Pakistan and the rest of Pakistan take precedence over the common thread of Islam between the two regions.

The country's conflict also stretched into the realm of cultural tension in 1965, when Pakistan and India went to war with one another over Jammu and Kashmir, conflicted lands in Pakistan's western half. After the death of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, Pakistan initiated a fight with India to try to gain control of these areas.<sup>53</sup> Kashmir was especially important to Pakistanis and Indians, alike. Despite having a Muslim majority, a Hindu monarch ruled the region, and India had claimed most of it after a war between the two nations following the 1947 partition. India believed the province was an important indicator of how India's secular state could exist, while Pakistan believed it had claim to it as a Muslim-majority province.<sup>54</sup>

During this war, the Pakistani government banned broadcasting content with an "Indian origin," a category that included the works of Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali Hindu writer from the Bengal Renaissance. Tagore's work had long been popular in Bengal, and his pro-British, anti-Muslim texts drove Pakistani opposition towards celebrating the anniversary of his birth in 1961, with Pakistan's government seeing his works as detrimental to the unity of East and West Pakistan. For Pakistan to ban his work due to its "Indian origin" conflated Tagore's popularity in Bengal with a Bengali affinity for India. This conflation discredited Tagore's works as

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<sup>53</sup> Rakesh Ankit, "Mountbatten and India, 1948–64," *The International History Review* 37, no. 2 (March 15, 2015): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2014.900812>.

<sup>54</sup> Ganguly, 169-72.



problematic to the unity of a nation at war. While this made sense from Pakistan's perspective given Tagore's status as a Bengali Hindu writer from a movement that explicitly excluded Bengali Muslims, his resonant importance among Bengali Muslims provided a sense of constructed unity, and his ban sent the message that this unity sat in direct opposition to the Pakistani state. Intellectuals and others in East Pakistan defended Tagore's works as "an assertion of the Bengali cultural tradition", and the defense of him amidst this ban reflects how strongly the province's Muslim-majority looked beyond religion to define their sense of national unity against a government that became less willing to defend them.<sup>55</sup>

Against this backdrop, Shiekh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League formally established a new direction for Bengali Muslims in Pakistan in 1966 with the Six-Point Program. Written with the help of a secular-democratic intellectual group called the National Association for Social and Economic Progress, the platform vocalized a formal platform of political aspirations that Bengali Muslim supporters of the Awami League could mobilize around.<sup>56</sup> Like the original seven point platform and the Twenty-One Point Program from the 1954 United Front elections, the Six Point Program demanded greater equity between East and West Pakistan. However, while the first two platforms placed language on the same level of importance as these adjustments to the state's function, the Six Points focused exclusively on how East Pakistan's relationship with the Pakistani state. The program proposed "a Federation of Pakistan" with a central government that would deal with matters of defense and foreign policy. To this end, "all other residuary subjects [would] be vested in the federating states", which included the creation of a "separate fiscal and monetary policy" for each side of the country, and entrusting the "power of taxation and revenue

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<sup>55</sup> Anisuzzaman, "Claiming and Disclaiming a Cultural Icon: Tagore in East Pakistan and Bangladesh," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (October 2008): 1060-63, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.77.4.1058>.

<sup>56</sup> Hasan, 166.

collection” to each side. This federalism stretched as far as stating that East Pakistan “should have a separate militia or paramilitary force”, although the central government would remain in control over defense policy.<sup>57</sup>

To garner support for the Six-Point platform, the Awami League did not equivocally reject Islam or embrace these developing tenets of Bengali nationalism. After announcing the Six-Point platform, the party joined four other political parties to form the Pakistani Democratic Movement, which sought to oust Ayub establish the foundation for democratic elections. To one end, the Awami League’s inclusion in this alliance represented the Bengali opposition to Ayub’s policies, pitching the pursuit of the Six-Point platform alongside the fight for Bengali linguistic authority and East Bengali autonomy. This suggests that the Awami League wished to align their platform’s economic and political goals with the social pursuits of Bengali Muslims in East Bengal. However, the presence of conservative, pro-Islamic parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami suggests that the Awami League implicitly endorsed the strong Muslim-oriented doctrine of the party. While the Jamaat itself did not endorse the linguistic and regional concerns that the Awami League prided themselves on, the fact that both parties united against Ayub reflects how East Bengali calls for political and economic reform were not mutually exclusive with the embrace of Islam within the political sphere.<sup>58</sup>

Even when facing opposition, the Awami League’s vision of an independent East Bengali nation grew stronger. In 1969, Yahya Khan, who had been in charge of Pakistan’s army, became president, succeeding Ayub Khan in that position.<sup>59</sup> Throughout 1969, Ayub Khan’s government arrested protestors and members of opposition parties in East Pakistan, sparking nationwide calls

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<sup>57</sup> Meghanā Guhathākuratā and Willem van Schendel, eds., *The Bangladesh Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, The World Readers (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 212–13.

<sup>58</sup> Islam and Islam, 6

<sup>59</sup> Lawrence Ziring, “Militarism in Pakistan: The Yahya Khan Interregnum,” *Asian Affairs* 1, no. 6 (1974): 406.

for Khan to step down and hold parliamentary elections in 1970. Faced with opposition from the Pakistani Democratic Movement and other sources of discontent, Ayub Khan resigned and Yahya Khan assumed power, with parliamentary elections sets for 1970.<sup>60</sup> These changes in power were not enough for the Awami League, which proposed changing the name of East Pakistan to Bangla Desh to reflect how “this region of the country [was] populated by the Bengali speaking people.”<sup>61</sup> In proposing to rename of the region, the Awami League laid the foundation of creating a new political entity and constructed a nation predicated upon the region’s Bengali heritage, as imagined by East Pakistanis whose disdain for Pakistan had grown in the two decades after the creation of the state.

### *The Fight for Bangladesh*

The incipient Bengali nationalist movement shaped fears about the upcoming parliamentary elections. In a speech to the nation in March, Yahya Khan condemned any “political party or individual [who would] or work against the ideology and integrity” of the country. This integrity had to “be preserved and must not be allowed to be adversely affected on regional and parochial grounds” that would not “adversely affect the solidarity of the people of Pakistan.” Khan’s emphasis on solidarity is sensible for any president seeking to unify a nation that had spent over a decade under martial law, but his focus on individuals, parties and regional alliances as threats to that unity underscores the perceived threat of the Bengali nationalist movement. Khan also stressed how Islam could unity otherwise divided faction, emphasizing

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, 211-212.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in *The Bangla Desh Papers: The Recorded Statements and Speeches of Z.A. Bhutto, Mujeeb-Ur-Rahman, Gen. Yahya Khan and Other Politicians of United Pakistan 1969-1971*. (Lahore: Vanguard Books Ltd., 1978), 42–43.

that the country “was established on the basis of the idea of the homeland for the Muslims”, a point of rhetoric oriented towards Bengalis in East Pakistan who had started to downplay the loyalty to religion and the Pakistani experiment during the 60s.<sup>62</sup> Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his Pakistani People’s Party emerged as the major competitor to the Awami League and its Six-Point platform.<sup>63</sup>

The Awami League relied on constructing a unified front among Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan. Mujibur Rahman also advocated a future where “Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians [stood] on the same platform as men on earth” and “should get united to fight out their rights” for their betterment.<sup>64</sup> This stance speaks to the Awami League’s rejection of an overly Islamic nation in favor of one that had a nominal commitment to citizenship for all. Such a position enabled the Awami League to embrace non-Muslim voters, who were more numerous in East Pakistan to begin with. By combining state-level reforms with a less religiously dogmatic approach, the Awami League capitalized on its anger towards the Pakistani state during the 1970 elections. On December 7, the party won a majority of the 313 seats in the National Assembly, winning 167 seats, while Bhutto’s Pakistani People’s Party won 87 seats.<sup>65</sup> The Awami League supplemented this victory ten days later, winning 288 of the 300 seats up for election in the provincial legislature of East Pakistan.<sup>66</sup>

Yahya Khan and the Pakistan executive forces in power were not receptive to the Awami League’s victory. On February 13, 1971, Khan declared March 3 as the day that Pakistan’s National Assembly would convene, but Bhutto announced that his party would not convene until

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *The Bangla Desh Papers*, 44-49.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, 214

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in *The Bangla Desh Papers*, 119.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, 214-15.

<sup>66</sup> Ludden, 82.

the Awami League stood down on contentious points of its Six Point program.<sup>67</sup> On March 1, Khan postponed the National Assembly's convening altogether.<sup>68</sup> In response, Mujibur Rahman called for local and national strikes to protest the decision.<sup>69</sup> These strikes turned into a full-fledged loyalty from East Pakistani media, the judiciary, and student organizations, as well as a popular uprising with pro-independence gatherings nationwide. During the month, police refused to fire on East Bengali protestors, and skirmishes began to take place between East and West Pakistani military forces. On March 23, 15 years after the ratification of Pakistan's first constitution, the *Banla Kendriya Chhatra Sangram Parishad*, an action committee dedicated to leading Bangladesh towards formal independence, raised the flag of an independent Bangladesh at Mujibur Rahman's home.<sup>70</sup>

Two days later, Pakistan launched Operation Searchlight, a military operation that sought to capture leadership of the Awami League, quell leaders of radical resistance, disarm Bengali armed forces, and control all modes of communication.<sup>71</sup> United States Consul General Archer Blood was stationed in Dhaka when Operation Searchlight began. He wrote that there was a "constant flash of tracer bullets across the dark sky" and "heavy firing in the vicinity of police lines and the East Pakistan Rifles barracks" on the 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>72</sup> Circumstances worsened over the next few days, with Sam Hoskinson, the White House's South Asia policy expert, advising Henry Kissinger that Pakistan's army had "embarked on a reign of terror aimed at eliminating the core

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<sup>67</sup> Ludden, 83.

<sup>68</sup> Brown, 212-14.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in *The Bangla Desh Papers*, 189-90.

<sup>70</sup> Ludden, 83-85.

<sup>71</sup> Amit Ranjan, "Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971: Narratives, Impacts and the Actors," *India Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2016): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928416637921>.

<sup>72</sup> Archer K. Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (Dhaka: University Press, 2002), 196.

of future resistance” in East Pakistan.<sup>73</sup> Blood echoed Hoskinson’s sentiments in a diplomatic cable he sent on March 28 called “Selective Genocide”, where he wrote that Pakistan’s army was “systematically eliminating” members of the Awami League, leaders of the Bengali student resistance, Hindus and Bengalis directly, with the army directing a “wave of terror directed against their own countrymen.”<sup>74</sup> Estimates indicate that, within the first three days of Operation Searchlight, 15,000 died in East Pakistan.<sup>75</sup>

On the March 26, Mujibur Rahman formally announced Bangladesh’s independence, announcing on the radio that the people of Bangladesh must fight “until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation army [was] expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved.”<sup>76</sup> On April 10, two weeks after the beginning of Pakistan’s attacks on the country, Bangladesh’s revolutionary government formally declared independence and “[confirmed the declaration of independence already made by [Sheikh Mujibur Rahman]”.<sup>77</sup> In the next week, Bangladesh’s independent government formed and built a formal resistance army to support those who had already begun to fight and resist Pakistan’s offensive.<sup>78</sup> Over the subsequent months, thousands of murders, rapes and village pillages took place across Bangladesh. Yasmin Saikia recounts the story of Madhumita, a woman nearly killed by Muslim League supporters who locked her and her brother in their home, raped her and set their house on fire. Madhumita said that, after her rape, she “was badly burned” when “[helping her] brother to escape [their

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<sup>73</sup> Samuel M Hoskinson, “Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger: Situation in Pakistan,” March 28, 1971, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/BEBB2.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> Archer Blood, “Selective Genocide” (U.S. Consulate (Daaca) Cable, n.d.), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/BEBB1.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> Asaf Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis* (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 2008), 153.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Ludden, 84.

<sup>77</sup> Ludden, 83-84

<sup>78</sup> Raghavan, 64-71.

burning] home by breaking open the door” to the house after her rape. To survive, she hid in a pond in her backyard, leaving the next morning to find her flesh “falling off [her] body” as she walked home with no clothes on.<sup>79</sup>

India’s government was acutely aware of what was taking shape in East Pakistan during the war. The country’s prime minister, Indira Gandhi, opposed the “injustice and atrocities” that was happening in East Pakistan, and both houses of India’s parliament denounced “the atrocities now being perpetuated on an unprecedented scale upon an unarmed and innocent people”, though the threat of war against Pakistan had prevented India from recognizing the independence of Bangladesh immediately.<sup>80</sup> India supervised Bangladesh’s resistance army, the *Mukti Bahini* as they fought against Pakistan.<sup>81</sup> During the war, about 102,000 refugees per day fled into India, leading to an estimated six million refugees fleeing to India by the end of June. With such a serious refugee crisis taking place, India had a vested interest in ending the problem causing this influx and protecting Hindus who were fleeing government targeting to end the war as quickly as possible.<sup>82</sup> Indian armed forces became involved in the war December 3, when, in the words of Air Chief Marshal P.C. Lal, India sought “to gain as much ground as possible” in East Pakistan.<sup>83</sup> After recognizing the state of Bangladesh on December 6, the country’s armed forces made substantial progress in a short stretch of time, approaching Dhaka from three directions within two weeks.<sup>84</sup> India’s involvement stretched Yahya Khan and Pakistan’s defense thin, with

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<sup>79</sup> Yasmin Saikia, “Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh,” *History Workshop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2004): 282, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbh041>.

<sup>80</sup> Gary Jonathan Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide*, First Vintage Books edition, July 2014 (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 89–90.

<sup>81</sup> Rose, Leo E., Sisson, Richard. 1990. *War and secession: Pakistan, India, and the creation of Bangladesh*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 181-182.

<sup>82</sup> Bass, 74-76.

<sup>83</sup> Raghavan, 238-39.

<sup>84</sup> Bass, 310-12.

Khan requesting assistance from U.S. President Richard Nixon to pursue a cease fire. While the United States did not become directly involved in the conflict, Nixon's decision to send the USS *Enterprise* to the Bay of Bengal on December 15 seemed to drive India and Pakistan towards a cease fire, which took place the next day. With the end of the nine-month war and two weeks of Indian involvement, East Pakistan was now fully independent as the nation of Bangladesh.<sup>85</sup>

Bangladesh's path to independence presented a distinct shift through Bengali Muslim national loyalties after the 1947 partition. After aligning with Pakistan's Indian Muslim homeland during partition, Bengali Muslims struggled to achieve political, economic or linguistic equality under as part of Pakistan. The Bengali Language Movement and Awami Muslim League capitalized on the anger at the Muslim League's insistence on declaring Urdu and the country's state language, as well as the pursuit of equal treatment for all of Bengal's lower class and agrarian workers who were also struggling in Pakistan's early years. While the Awami League and Krishak Proja Party joined forces as part of the Bengali-oriented United Front, Pakistan's institutional instability prevented these parties from making a substantial impact until the Awami League formed a coalition with a Muslim League off-shoot party and held Pakistan's prime ministership before Ayub Khan took Pakistan under martial law.

Despite the instability and Bengali Muslim political mobilization against the Pakistani state apparatus, it was not until the 60s that Bengali Muslim national identity started to come in conflict with Pakistan's goals as a nation. By placing an increased emphasis on the intersection between state-level reforms and ideas about Bengali identity, the Awami League pursued a political platform that placed its political and economic goals alongside idealized notions of Bengali nationalism within Pakistan. This sense of nationalism soon shifted from a pursuit of

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<sup>85</sup> Bass, 314-21.



autonomy within the Pakistani project to a desire to create a new nation altogether, a nation that touted ideas of Bengali identity that were not considered emblematic of the Bengali Muslim experience earlier in the decade. It is this composite of constructed identity narratives that drove Bangladesh's war for independence, a war that, with the help of India, led to Bangladesh's formation. The contradiction between East Pakistan's creation as a part of an Indian Muslim homeland and Bangladesh's foundation as a project of political and economic concerns serve as the foundation for the country's early struggles to truly wrestle with the role that religion would play in a country that never had to consciously consider that role for itself.

### Chapter 3: Negotiating Islam in the Sonar Bangla

Bangladesh's formation in 1971 marked the first major moment in East Bengal's history when Bengalis had political authority over the region. Ever since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, foreign empires had governed East Bengal, facilitating the growth of settled, wet rice settlement in the region, as well as the rise of Islam in the eastern half of the Bengal delta. These empires also enabled the development of East Bengal as a primarily agrarian, peasant society, with land ownership administered by Hindu, middle-class *zamindars*. The colonial administration built upon this precedent by establishing the permanent settlement system and making decisions that furthered the economic and political disparities between Bengal Muslims and Hindus. Eventually, this polarization led Bengali Muslims to endorse the creation of Pakistan, a decision that fueled political, social and economic disparities of a different sort, this time at the hand of fellow Muslims. Bangladesh's creation was the ultimate culmination of evolving Bengali nationalist movements that addressed the various grievances that Bengali Muslims have had towards those who ruled over them. While invoking Islamic gradually over the course of the century, linguistic and ethnic unity served as more prominent tools to build support for the state-centric goals that the Awami League pursued with the Six Point platform.

Given this history under the administration of higher political powers, Bangladesh's first two decades marked the first major, prolonged time when East Bengalis had the opportunity to govern themselves. However, the legacy of these foreign and colonial rulers led to the country starting with a blank slate politically, while dealing with a myriad of economic and social issues that resulted from multiple centuries of authority from the outside. Bangladesh's emergent political elite had the power to deal with these problems. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Awami League and Bangladesh's path to independence, was the president of the country's

revolutionary government, which oversaw the construction of the country's first constitution.<sup>1</sup> After being assassinated in 1975, Mujibur Rahman's authoritarian successor, Ziaur Rahman, was a prominent leader of Bangladesh's revolutionary military, and formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which soon became one of the country's two prominent political parties.<sup>2</sup> General Hussein Muhammad Ershad was another authoritarian leader who followed Rahman after his assassination in 1981, and formed his own political party, the Jatiya Party, that encompassed his political supporters. Ershad's rule came to an end in 1990, when a popular uprising across the country forced him to step down and allow the restoration of civil democracy in Bangladesh. Along with these prominent leaders and their governing administrations, MPs from elite intellectual, business and legal backgrounds contributed to this emergent political elite that sat removed from the rest of Bangladesh's predominant peasantry.<sup>3</sup> While all three leaders and their parliaments had democratically dubious reigns as the country's executive authority, they had three distinct visions for how to advance Bangladesh forward, and the opposition to their paths heightened the instability that these leaders' visions aimed to solve.

While Bangladesh's problems stemmed from multiple historical dimensions, the role that Islam would play in this new nation also proved critical to the function of the state. The degree to which Bangladesh aligned with Islam dictated whether the government would be fully inclusive of the 15% of citizens who were not Muslim, defining the parameters of citizenship. How Islam would interact with Bangladesh's political system defined which parties and ideologies were legitimate within the state's dysfunctional political apparatus. Islam's role within the nation even

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<sup>1</sup> Abul Fazl Huq, "Constitution-Making in Bangladesh," *Pacific Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1973): 59–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2756227>.

<sup>2</sup> Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*, Islamic Civilization & Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 137–38.

<sup>3</sup> Jalal Firoj, "FORTY YEARS OF BANGLADESH PARLIAMENT : TRENDS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 58, no. 1 (2013): 84–88.

had diplomatic consequences, with loyalty to Islam giving the poor and economically disadvantaged state new opportunities to build relationships and receive aid from economic powerhouses within the Muslim world. While the way the country constituted Islam would not have a substantial impact on how citizens of the country conducted themselves religiously, the way that the country's political elites navigated the contentious intersection of Islam and politics had great implications for how capable the unstable state of Bangladesh would be able to address the more pressing economic, social and political concerns that would substantially affect the well-being of the country.

In its first two decades as a nation, Bangladesh transitioned from embracing secularism as core tenet of its constitution in 1972 to declaring Islam as the country's state religion in 1988. While the motivations of these three executive leaders differed, this shift towards embracing Islam was an attempt at political expedience beyond anything else. While Mujibur Rahman championed secularism as state policy to build upon the rhetoric of his party's independence movement, he realized the limited political efficacy of this alignment, and began to openly embrace Islam to salvage the political support that he lost throughout his tenure. Ziaur Rahman and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party completely countered his predecessors approach, pressing a new vision of national identity that provided a meaningful foil to Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, along with an avenue for support from more conservative, Islamist parties. As martial law administrator and president, Rahman struggled to substantially move forward, and General Ershad and his military took over the country amidst heightened social instability, economic stagnation, and without the support of the AL and BNP. Ershad pressed stronger Islamic tendencies than his predecessors, but struggled to amass the same support from the two mainstream parties and other Islamist forces, alike. Eventually, the AL and BNP, led by Mujibur

Rahman's daughter and Ziaur Rahman's daughter, respectively, joined forces to regain democratic control of the nation, forgoing any differences in religious affinity to restore a democracy that had essentially become non-existent.

### *Creating Secularism in Bangladesh*

In the year after the Bangladesh Liberation War, Awami League leaders worked to develop the legal and constitutional nation of the new nation of Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, president of Bangladesh's revolutionary government, passed the Bangladesh Constituent Assembly Order. This order created a Constituent Assembly which would create the constitution. The assembly included East Pakistan's elected representatives from the 1970 national elections, as well as those elected to East Pakistan's provincial assembly that same year. Of the 430 members of the Constituent Assembly, 429 were members of the Awami League, effectively making the Bangladesh constitution an Awami League project.<sup>4</sup> These Awami League politicians worked to determine how Bangladesh would function as a state.

Nation builders had to address was the role that Islam would play in the new state. Such decisions occurred against the backdrop of a bloody war with Pakistan. Along with the memory of war, the rhetoric of the Awami League and independence fighters had partially rejected how Pakistan weaponized religion, creating a climate where this previous embrace of Islam was unwelcome in the new nation. Equally important, Bangladesh had a sizeable population of Hindus, Christians and Buddhists, in addition to its Muslim-majority.<sup>5</sup> While the Pakistan's Muslim-majority diluted the impact of these groups since its formation, Bangladesh's creation

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<sup>4</sup> Huq, 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 63.

led to this group increasing in proportion within the new country, accounting for about 15% of the country's population.<sup>6</sup>

The Awami League embraced secularism because it was politically expedient. Since the 60s, the party had pursued policies that existed independent of religion. The party's original Six Points, for example, did not have any direct references to religion. Additionally, rhetoric from the fight for independence emphasized a disdain for a religiously motivated state.<sup>7</sup> This gave the party support among Hindus in Bengal, who, according to the 1974 census, made up about 13.5 percent of the population.<sup>8</sup> Pushing for a state that was not-explicitly Islamic would help the party retain this base of support. Moreover, 70% of refugees during the Bangladesh Liberation War were Hindu, so the new nation naturally hoped to prevent a similar exodus. Protecting Hindus also helped to strengthen Bangladesh's relationship with India, which absorbed almost 10 million refugees during the war.<sup>9</sup> The declaration of secularism was also a response to how Pakistan used religion as a way to prioritize the unity of the nation over the just treatment of Bengalis.<sup>10</sup>

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as the leader of the Awami League led the charge for secularism. Mujibur Rahman's vision for the state's constitutional foundation was called "Mujibism". This ideology centered on four basic tenets: nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. To him, secularism was wholly compatible with a nation defined primarily by "Bengali culture, language, folklore, mores, and the general Bengali environment" rather than

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<sup>6</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 63

<sup>7</sup> Md Islam and Md Islam, "Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh: Contesting the Dominant Narratives," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (March 3, 2018): 8, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7030037>.

<sup>8</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Zillur R Khan, "Islam and Bengali Nationalism," *Asian Survey* 25, no. 8 (n.d.): 847-48.

<sup>10</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta, "Amidst the Winds of Change: The Hindu Minority in Bangladesh," *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 2 (April 2012): 290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2012.664434>.

Islam.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Dr. Kamal Hossain, a lead author of the constitution, stated that the institution of secularism looked to protect Bangladesh from “the abuse of religion in the political realm” that Pakistan committed against Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> For Mujib, “Bengalis could receive inspiration and be motivated to strive for the uplift of their society” by focusing on these binding components to create a democratic, egalitarian nation with a strong state apparatus, instead of focusing on a vehicle like religion.<sup>13</sup> By using this broad marker of collective identity, Mujibism sought to define Bangladesh as a nation of Bengalis defined by their shared fight for “liberation” from Pakistan.

The Constituent Assembly ratified the Bangladesh’s first constitution on November 4, 1972.<sup>14</sup> The constitution of the new People’s Republic of Bangladesh included the four components of Mujibism as the country’s fundamental principles. Article 8 rooted the country’s sense of Bengali nationalism in “language and culture”.<sup>15</sup> While the country’s push for independence was partially rooted in the defense of language, the constitution’s emphasis on language, rather than its Muslim-majority, as a source of unity, reflected the vigor with which the Language Movement,. These foundations stretched into Article 12, which committed the new nation to secularism. The article eliminated religious politics by prohibiting the state giving “favour of any religion” in defining political status, prevent the “abuse of religion for political purposes”, and forbid “any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practising a particular religion.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Khan, 844-46.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Islam and Islam, 7

<sup>13</sup> Khan, 846.

<sup>14</sup> Huq, “Constitution-Making”, 69

<sup>15</sup> “Part II: Fundamental Principles of State Policy Arts. 8-25,” *Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh* English original text of the Constitution of 1972 (1972): 5.

<sup>16</sup> “Part II: Fundamental Principles of State Policy Arts. 8-25”, 5.

Articles 8 and 12 aligned with a model of secularism known as *laicite*, or the complete absence of religion in politics.<sup>17</sup> As such, the article prohibited all political parties with any religious affiliations from participating in government.<sup>18</sup> While this was a victory for the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the intellectuals who crafted the constitution, it marked a significant departure from past practice and historical precedent. Since the Mughal Empire, Islam religion had played some role in state administration. Yet, and for the first time with Muslim leadership in place, an independent Bangladesh's first constitution rejected religion as a political tool. This conflict was most evident when Mujibur Rahman led a Muslim prayer after the Constituent Assembly passed the 1972 constitution. Very quickly, Mujibur Rahman had to take on a defensive allegiance to Islam as the country.<sup>19</sup> Despite the sensitive foundation of secularism and the constitution, Bangladesh the Awami League's direction when the party secured a significant majority in the country's first parliamentary elections in 1973, winning 293 of the 300 seats up for election.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, this departure from past practice did not last long, as the instability that Bangladesh faced in its early years led leaders to embrace of Islam as a way to reinforce and reassert their own political legitimacy.

### *Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Fall of Secularism*

The mandate Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League could claim as state crafters proved difficult to maintain in the face of both internal economic crises and political disarray.

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<sup>17</sup> Mubashar Hasan, "The Diverse Roots of the 'Secular' in East Pakistan (1947–71) and the Crisis of 'Secularism' in Contemporary Bangladesh," *History and Sociology of South Asia* 11, no. 2 (July 2017): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2230807517703721>.

<sup>18</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ali Riaz, "Traditional Institutions as Tools of Political Islam in Bangladesh," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 40, no. 3 (June 1, 2005): 173, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909605055072>.

<sup>20</sup> Firoj, 85.



Since its creation, the country had “one of the largest contingents of international relief personnel that any nation has ever witnessed”, with the international community committing about \$1.5 billion in foreign aid during the country’s first three years of existence.<sup>21</sup> In 1974, Bangladesh suffered a nearly year-long famine as a result of substantial flooding in the country, which caused the price of rice to rise by over 50 percent, and led to the death of somewhere between 450,000 and one million Bangladeshis. With 60% of Bangladesh’s GDP dependent on farming, the consequences agricultural and climatic circumstances were that much more dire to the country’s well-being.<sup>22</sup> Beyond these economic shortcomings, political dysfunction compounded the economic disparities that had emerged in the country. In 1973, the Awami League reported that political opponents had killed between 20 and 30 of its members every month, while the country’s early disappointments had “led to a tremendous upsurge of political activity and the growth of nihilism in the country”, with “self-proclaimed potential Mao Tse-tungs, Che Guevaras, and Ho Chi Minhs abound” throughout the country, according to Marcus Franda, a political scientist, during a meeting of the House Committee of Foreign Affairs.<sup>23</sup>

In the face of this chaos, Mujibur Rahman sought to consolidate his support using Islam. As early as 1973, Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League found ways to publically demonstrate their allegiance to Islam. Mujibur Rahman increased government funding for Islamic institutions like *madrassas* (Islamic schools), which received Taka 7.2 million in 1973 compared to Taka 2.5 million in 1971. Additionally, he lifted the ban on Quranic television broadcasts on and imposed

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<sup>21</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia, *Political Trends in India and Bangladesh Hearing, Ninety-Third Congress, First Session* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1973), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Rey Hernández-Julián, Hani Mansour, and Christina Peters, “The Effects of Intrauterine Malnutrition on Birth and Fertility Outcomes: Evidence From the 1974 Bangladesh Famine,” *Demography* 51, no. 5 (2014): 1778–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-014-0326-5>.

<sup>23</sup> *Political Trends in India and Bangladesh Hearing, Ninety-Third Congress, First Session*, 1, 10-17.

a public ban on the sale of alcohol. On the diplomatic front, Mujibur Rahman began to show support for Middle Eastern nations and for Pakistan, joining the Organization of Islamic Conference at its February 1974 meeting in Lahore.<sup>24</sup> In 1974, three years after going to war with the country for independence, Bangladesh formally recognized Pakistan, and walked back demands to prosecute Pakistani prisoners of war for war crimes.<sup>25</sup> This new commitment to Islam manifested itself in smaller ways as well. For example, Mujibur Rahman began finishing by using the phrase *khuda hafez*, meaning “God protect you”, instead of *joy Bangla*, or “glory to Bengal”.<sup>26</sup> These internal, diplomatic and rhetorical changes by Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League quickly challenged the separation of the Bengali state and Islam and pulled back on their initial commitment to secularism. As Mujibur Rahman’s political power as prime minister weakened amidst this backlash over issues like the famine in the country, dysfunctional state, and inconsistent religious policy, he looked to take the challenge of keeping Bangladesh afloat into his own hands, at whatever cost necessary.

Working to consolidate his political power, Mujibur Rahman declared a state of emergency across Bangladesh in December 1974, suspending fundamental rights and limiting the power of the courts. The Awami League parliament majority amended the constitution to limit its own power to shore up Mujibur Rahman’s authority. During this state of emergency, parliament passed the Fourth Amendment to the constitution, creating a new office of president, an office that Mujibur Rahman would hold.<sup>27</sup> With his executive power secure, Mujibur Rahman took steps to unify the state under a single party, the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League,

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<sup>24</sup> Islam and Islam, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Khan, 845.

<sup>26</sup> Islam and Islam, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Shah Alam, “The State-Religion Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh – A Critique,” *Verfassung in Recht Und Übersee* 24, no. 2 (1991): 210, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0506-7286-1991-2-209>.

or BAKSAL. The party's design mirrored that of the 1954 United Front.<sup>28</sup> By consolidating the interests of his own political party with the country's agrarian party, Mujibur Rahman attempted to limit opposition to his rule. To this end, he also banned the country's other political parties, and formed a police force, the *Rakhi Bahini*, which used military tactics to keep control of the country.<sup>29</sup> This turn towards authoritarianism is evidence of the state's basic weakness, and Mujibur Rahman combining these decisions with an increased embrace of Islam reflects the strategic way that he used religion to complement these goals of consolidated political authority.

Mujibur Rahman's stint as Bangladesh's head of state ended on August 15, when he and members of his family were assassinated in his home by members of Bangladesh's military, led by Khondokar Mushtaque Ahmed, a member of Mujibur Rahman's cabinet. Mushtaque Ahmed declared martial law and named himself president, with state radio saying the assassination was done "in the greater interests of the country."<sup>30</sup> Mushtaque Ahmed named Ziaur Rahman as the country's Chief of the Army Staff, but the army clashed head on with Ahmed as they sought to assume power of the state for itself.<sup>31</sup> Rahman, while not directly involved in this organized opposition to Ahmed, hoped to use the instability to secure the authority to lead Bangladesh towards a new future.<sup>32</sup> The chaos came to an end in November, when the military took charge of the Bangladesh's government, instituting martial law in the process. Under this administration, Rahman, took charge as Chief Martial Law Administrator, serving as the main authority on Bangladesh's new future towards nationalism and state function.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad: An Interpretive Study*, 1st ed (Karachi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 101–5.

<sup>29</sup> Uddin, 122.

<sup>30</sup> William Borders, "Mu Jib Reported Overthrown and Killed In a Coup by the Bangladesh Military," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1975, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/08/15/archives/mujib-reported-overthrown-and-killed-in-a-coup-by-the-bangladesh.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Ziring, 108-21.

<sup>32</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Ziring, *Bangladesh*, 108–21.

*Military Rule, Rahman, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party*

A hero of the Bangladesh Liberation War, Ziaur Rahman's reputation in the country revolved around his military leadership. As an inheritor of Bangladesh's unstable foundation, Rahman looked to differentiate his goals for the nation from those of Mujibur Rahman. In contrast to a national identity grounded in shared language and folklore, Bangladeshi nationalism sought to differentiate the Muslim-majority of Bengalis in Bangladesh from the predominantly Bengali Hindus of western Bengal.<sup>34</sup> Rahman fused religion and politics in a selective way, working with Islamic groups when it was politically expedient to do so. His pursuit of nationalism centered around unifying the country by leaning on conservative Muslims who wished to use religion to bind all citizens of Bangladesh together at the same time as he pressed for the country's stability and advancement.<sup>35</sup> Rahman articulated this vision as Bangladeshi nationalism, a formal reimagining of Mujibur Rahman's pursuit of Bengali nationalism that looked to reorient Bangladesh as a nation that valued the role of Islam within politics.

Khondokar Abdul Hamid, a journalist and politician, articulated this vision of Bangladeshi nationalism in a February 1976 speech at the Bangla Academy.<sup>36</sup> Abdul Hamid believed that Bangladesh could not call itself a "Bengali" nation like Mujibur Rahman, because the Bengalis outside Bangladesh were not the same as those within it. According to Abdul Hamid, while all Bengali-language speakers may eat similar foods, engage in similar practices or "derive from the same stock", as the "culture, national essence, and country-feeling" of these groups were not the same. Instead, this vision of nationalism was Bangladeshi, rather than

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<sup>34</sup> Uddin, 137-38.

<sup>35</sup> Khan, 849

<sup>36</sup> Khondokar Abdul Hamid, "Bangladeshi Jatiyabad," trans. Rachel Fell McDermott, *Spashtabhashir Kalam 2* (2006): 107-10. quoted in McDermott, *Sources of Indian Traditions*, 875-76.

Bengali, a unity derived from, among other markers, Bangladesh's "faith, belief in harmony, language, Arabic, art, literature" and other points of independence from other Bengalis. This vision stands in explicit contrast to Mujibur Rahman's dependence on folklore, literature and language as sufficient to constitute Bengali nationalism within Bangladesh. To this end, Abdul Hamid's distinctions between Bengalis in Bangladesh and those elsewhere lay in the "experiences, religion, actions, worship customs" that defined the people of Bangladesh, going so far as to call Bengali nationalism a historical "misnomer".<sup>37</sup>

The foundations of Bangladeshi nationalism – as opposed to Bengali nationalism – laid down in this speech reflect the historical role of Islam in Bengali politics. Abdul Hamid acknowledged directly how Bangladesh was unique because "85 percent of the people [in Bangladesh] are Muslim." Rather than treating Bangladesh's Muslim-majority as secondary to national boundaries, shared language, and ethnic homogeneity, this vision sees the experience of Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh as distinct compared to Bengalis elsewhere. To this end, he states that "the idea that [Bangladesh and West Bengal] share one culture and one nationalism is by no means true."<sup>38</sup> True to how Bengali Muslims and Bengali Hindus had defined themselves throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Abdul Hamid's speech placed Islam at the center of Bangladeshi nationalism.

Rahman's endorsement of this new vision of national expression served as a vehicle to redefine Bangladesh's direction. While not drastic in how it relied upon arguments of ethnic diversity and religious expression that justified support for the decisions like the 1905 partition of Bengal, Bangladeshi nationalism revised the collective narrative of nationalism that defined Bangladesh's formation during the 50s and 60s. Relying on Islam as a basis of support connected

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<sup>37</sup> Abdul Hamid, 107-10 quoted in McDermott 875-76.

<sup>38</sup> Abdul Hamid, 107-10 quoted in McDermott 875-76.

Rahman's martial law administration to the majority religious group, creating a foundation of national unity upon which he could pursue his vision of the state. The decision made sense given Islam's traditional role within East Bengal's governance, and by explicitly calling upon it for inspiration, Rahman gave himself the opportunity to attract support from those conservative adherents of Islam that Mujibur Rahman's secularism had disillusioned.<sup>39</sup>

Rahman consolidated his authority by taking over the presidency of the country in April 1977.<sup>40</sup> In his new role of increased authority, one of Rahman's first major installations of Bangladeshi nationalism was Second Proclamation Order no. 1 later in the month, which made amended Bangladesh's constitution in multiple ways. First, the act added the words "Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim" to the preamble of the constitution, meaning "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful", to the beginning of the constitution. The order also removed Article 12 from the constitution, which delineated the terms of secularism in Bangladesh, replacing the word "secularism" with "the principles of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah." While falling short of making Islam the state religion of the country, the act integrated Islam within the constitution, a departure from its censure in the previous constitution. The law also changed the constitutional name of citizens of the country from "Bengali" to "Bangladeshi", aligning the constitution with the naming conventions of Bangladeshi nationalism.<sup>41</sup> Beyond the language of Bangladeshi nationalism, the act also changed the language constitution's preamble to recognize that country's formation resulted from a "historic war for national independence", rather than a "historical struggle for national liberation." This change seemingly small changed minimized the

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<sup>39</sup> Khan, 849

<sup>40</sup> Syed Serajul Islam, "The State in Bangladesh Under Zia (1975-81)," *Asian Survey* 24, no. 5 (1984): 562.

<sup>41</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 218.

emphasis on the historical social movements that Bengali nationalists considered essential to the nation's formation.<sup>42</sup>

Along with this order, Rahman released a manifesto called the Nineteen-Point Program, which laid out a vision of Bangladesh, which included the embrace of “complete faith in and reliance on the Almighty Allah.” The platform also called for improved relationships between Bangladesh and other Muslim nations. Along with these affirmations of Islam, the program included other specific state-building goals, including agrarian development, inclusion of women and youth, eradication of homelessness, and addressing health care issues.<sup>43</sup> The platform also specified a commitment to “safeguard the rights of all citizens irrespective of religion, colour, and sect” and to “consolidate national unity and solidarity”, speaking to a continue commitment to protect non-Muslims, even if the nation itself strongly valued Islam as a guiding force.<sup>44</sup> Religion was a major point of differentiation between it and the Awami League's vision for country, and this underscores the degree to which Rahman weaponized religion as a political tool. If Islam's role within the nation was strong and stable, then the political commotion that could come from ambiguously embracing it or outright rejecting it would cease, giving Rahman the political space to theoretically pursue his economic and social goals.

The release of the Nineteen-Point Program was Rahman's first attempt to link his pursuit Bangladeshi nationalism to a functioning democracy. After releasing his Nineteen-Point Program, Rahman was affirmed as the country's president on May 30, earning a 99.5% vote of approval 85% turnout to continue serving as president until Bangladesh's parliamentary elections

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<sup>42</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 34–35.

<sup>43</sup> Abdul Latif Masoom, *Dilemmas of a Military Ruler: A Political Study of the Zia Regime*, 1st edition (Afsar Brothers, 2000), 251–52. quoted in McDermott, 873-74.

<sup>44</sup> Masoom 251-252 quoted in McDermott, 873-74.

in 1978.<sup>45</sup> This referendum, however, was hardly democratic or open. Rahman's government heavily censored newspapers and required media outlets to positively promote his Nineteen-Point Program, and opposition political parties were not allowed to participate in the election in any way. At the polls themselves, voters were required to place their votes in openly marked boxes, publicly exposing any dissenters and discouraging an actual vote count from coming together.<sup>46</sup> This underscores the weakness of Bangladesh's democratic institutions at this point in the decade. Regardless of his orientation towards religion, Rahman's authority rested exclusively upon how strong of a hold he had over the military and democratic institutions that he used to maintain power.

During his interim presidency, he made several decisions that increased Bangladesh's political alignment with Islam. The government formed the Madrassah Education Board to create a standardized curriculum to teach Islamic classes in schools. On top of this, the government created an Islamic studies course that was required of all Muslim students in grades 1 through 8. Beyond education, the government also introduced the call to Muslim prayer on state-owned television and radio outlets, along with declaring the Prophet Muhammad's birthday a national holiday. During this time, Rahman grew closer to strong Islamist leaders, who were more inclined to support his Islamic policies.<sup>47</sup> The original constitution of the nation had banned these parties, but Rahman's willingness to allow these parties and their platforms to exist validated their political concerns for Rahman's advancement. Rather than establish political authority by appealing to the country's religious minorities as the Awami League had done, Rahman embraced those most willing to accept a state that was strongly Islamic. Developing this base of

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<sup>45</sup> Islam, "Zia", 563.

<sup>46</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 219–20.

<sup>47</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 36–37.



support gave Rahman an additional political avenue to build future coalitions and political alliances with, validating his regime as a potential democratic institution and quelling the risk of these parties and leaders demeaning his authority over time.

In this vein of developing legitimate support for his policies, Rahman continued to transition from an authoritarian military leader to democratically viable politician with a specific vision for Bangladesh's future. To secure his authority as a democratic leader, Rahman held an election for the post of president in June 1978. Despite facing off with a candidate selected by the Awami League and other parties, Rahman won this election with 76% of the votes cast in his favor compared to 21% for the opposition candidate, with a meager 53% turnout.<sup>48</sup> These figures speak to the weakness of Bangladesh's democratic institutions to legitimately function during martial law, a task that became more difficult with Rahman elected to serve as president until 1983.<sup>49</sup> Leading up to the impending parliamentary elections, Rahman consolidated his support even further by establishing the Bangladesh Nationalist Party on September 1.<sup>50</sup> The party's rhetoric focused on the political and economic reforms in Ziaur Rahman's Nineteen-Point Program.<sup>51</sup> Forming the BNP presented an opportunity for Rahman to consolidate his power inside a theoretically democratic Bangladesh. While Rahman was still ultimately the top authority in Bangladesh, the creation of a party to validate his pursuit of integrating Islam and politics served as a democratic buffer for his essentially authoritarian leadership.

After being democratically elected as president and taking charge of a political party, Rahman completed his transition from a military leader to nominally democratic politician in the

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<sup>48</sup> M. Rashiduzzaman, "Bangladesh 1978: Search for A Political Party," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 2 (1979): 191–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643785>.

<sup>49</sup> A. M. Quamrul Alam, "The Nature of the Bangladesh State in the Post-1975 Period," *Contemporary South Asia* 2, no. 3 (1993): 311–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584939308719719>.

<sup>50</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 221.

<sup>51</sup> Rashiduzzaman, 193.

long-awaited 1979 parliamentary election. These elections were originally scheduled for 1978, but postponements and opposition led to it taking place on February 18, 1979.<sup>52</sup> Along with the BNP, opposition parties like the Awami League and Bangladesh Muslim League competed in these elections, though the BNP was the only party campaigning on any official platform.<sup>53</sup> The election resulted in a victory for Rahman, with the BNP securing 207 seats, compared to the Awami League's 39 seats.<sup>54</sup> As with Rahman's presidential election one year prior, the overwhelming success of the BNP and estimated turnout of about 51.3% of eligible voters, the elections were little indication of Bangladesh's democratic stability or affinity for the Islamic policies that Rahman and the BNP campaigned on.<sup>55</sup> While Rahman made more pronounced efforts to make these elections fair, no party was in a place to legitimately compete with the party backed by his authoritarian regime.

With this dubiously democratic support for Bangladeshi nationalism, Rahman and the BNP turned their platform of national identity into formal law. One of Rahman's earliest actions as president under his new BNP parliament was passing the Fifth Amendment to the constitution. The amendment, passed on April 5, turned all the martial law decisions made between 1975 and 1979 into law.<sup>56</sup> This amendment had the support of the Islamic Democratic League, a coalition of conservative Islamist parties revived after the beginning of Rahman's tenure as martial law administrator. The additional support that Rahman and BNP earned from the Islamic Democratic League propped up the Islamic approaches to governance that Rahman and his party pursued

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<sup>52</sup> Riaz, *Unfolding State*, 221.

<sup>53</sup> Mohammad Kahn and Habib Zafarullah, "The 1979 Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 10 (1979): 1027–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643851>.

<sup>54</sup> Firoj, 85.

<sup>55</sup> Firoj, 86.

<sup>56</sup> A. Haque, "Bangladesh 1979: Cry for a Sovereign Parliament," *Asian Survey* 20, no. 2 (1980): 219, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644025>.

during their parliament.<sup>57</sup> This amendment pressed Bangladesh's legal foundation closer to the Islamic vision that Rahman and his BNP desired, playing to the anger of strong Islamic voices who disapproved of how Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League sought to disconnect religion and politics.<sup>58</sup> A day after passing this amendment to the constitution, Rahman lifted the state of martial law, cementing his transition from military to civilian (albeit authoritarian), ruler.<sup>59</sup>

During the BNP's parliamentary tenure, the Islamic initiatives that the party pursued had an effect on the country. Rahman and the BNP's emphasis on madrasahs and Islamic education facilitated the rapid growth of both in the country. Between 1977-78 and 1978-79, the number of madrasahs in the country increased from 1,956 to 2,259, while the number of students enrolled in these schools rose from 375,200 to 543,579. This marked a roughly 15% increase in schools and about 45% increase in student enrollment.<sup>60</sup> The parliament itself was a rocky institution, with about 32.5% of working days in session being boycotted by the opposition, speaking to the instability the BNP policy, religious and otherwise, brought to the parliament.<sup>61</sup>

Rahman's tenure as president, however, abruptly ended after soldiers ordered by a military officer who disapproved of Ziaur Rahman assassinated him on May 30, 1981. In the months after his death, Abdus Sattar served as his interim successor, before being elected as president of the country in November of that year. However, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, Rahman's chief of staff and newly appointed chief of the army, pressed Sattar to surrender the country to the military so that Ershad and the military could lead the country in its

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<sup>57</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 37.

<sup>58</sup> Guhathakurta, 291.

<sup>59</sup> Haque, 219

<sup>60</sup> Tazeen M. Murshid, "State, Nation, Identity: The Quest for Legitimacy in Bangladesh\*," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (December 1997): 19–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856409708723294>.

<sup>61</sup> Firoj, 90.

reformation after Rahman's complicated presidency.<sup>62</sup> He believed that Bangladesh was "heading towards a dangerous situation" in the time after Ziaur Rahman's death, and that "there was no other way out from the situation than the imposition of Martial Law".<sup>63</sup> In March 1982, Ershad and the military took over ruling powers from Sattar in a bloodless coup, restoring martial law and suspending political parties, the National Assembly and, the constitution.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, Rahman's path as a leader is a story of how weak Bangladesh's democratic institutions were in allowing him to administer power in the way that he did. To differentiate his approach to national expression from his predecessor, Rahman embraced Islam as a political tool, opening the avenues for Islamist parties to contend in the nation. Without strong democratic institutions to counter his decisions, Rahman's transition to an Islamicly-oriented Bangladeshi nationalism did not experience any worthwhile opposition to validate it as anything more than a simple way to extract support from the Bengali Muslim majority in the country.

#### *Ershad and the Limits of Martial Law*

Considering his rise to power, Ershad's rule was controversial from the start. He did not have the support from neither the Awami League nor the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.<sup>65</sup> Without the support of Bangladesh's major parties, Ershad's rule struggled to gain any sort of political legitimacy beyond being a military regime. Along the way, his attempts to gather support from Islamic parties faltered, as those parties oriented themselves towards both the AL and BNP.<sup>66</sup> While Ershad and his newly formed Jatiya Party pursued policies that aligned with a

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<sup>62</sup> Ziring, *Bangladesh*, 141–53.

<sup>63</sup> H. M. Ershad, *Face to Face* (Dacca, Bangladesh: Dept. of Films and Publications, Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1982), 5–7.

<sup>64</sup> Ziring, *Bangladesh*, 153.

<sup>65</sup> Uddin, 138–39.

<sup>66</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 38.

more Islamic Bangladesh, the priorities of the two mainstream political parties no longer lied in defining how to effectively integrate Islam within the state. The pursuit of a stable democracy became the priority of both the BNP and AL, who both disregarded questions of religious nationalism to work together in pushing Ershad out of power.

Ershad's embrace of Islam is most evident of how willingly Bangladesh's early leaders embraced Islam as a political tool. One of Ershad's concrete moves to align himself with Islam was proposing to make Arabic a mandatory language for all students in primary and secondary schools, a thinly veiled nod to traditional Islamic ideals.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, speaking before a gathering of teachers from *madrassahs* in 1983, Ershad said that he wanted "Islamic principles" to become part of Bangladeshi Muslim "cultural life", an explicit call to a society guided by Islam.<sup>68</sup> Along with proposals like these, Ershad also addressed the symbolic foundation of Bangladesh's less overtly Islamic disposition. In the years following the 1952 Bengali Language Movement, the anniversary of Ekushey had been marked by an annual celebration at the Shahid Minar, a monument built to commemorate those killed that day.<sup>69</sup> While this decoration and commemoration took place within the eastern, Muslim-majority, half of Bengal, *alpona* is a Bengali form of folk art that is typically associated with Hindu religious symbolism and occasions like Holi and Hindu pujas.<sup>70</sup> Given the celebration's association with Hinduism, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, Bangladesh's ruler under martial law in 1982, declared that Ekushey would be celebrated with a more proper Islamic ceremony, with prayer and Quran recitations.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ziring, *Bangladesh*, 157.

<sup>68</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Uddin, 126.

<sup>70</sup> "The Mystery of Indian Floor Paintings," *The Chitrolekha Journal on Art and Design*, February 24, 2013, <http://chitrolekha.com/the-mystery-of-indian-floor-paintings/>.

<sup>71</sup> Islam, 24.

Like Rahman before him, Ershad looked to transition from a military ruler to a nominally democratic leader through a parliamentary election that his regime held in 1986. Before these elections, Ershad formed the Jatiya Party as a political party to participate in the parliamentary election process.<sup>72</sup> Along with the creation of the Jatiya Party, the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party had two new leaders as the 1986 elections came around. Sheikh Hasina was one of the daughters of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Hasina was out of the country when her father was assassinated in 1975, and while she could not return to the country until 1981, she became the leader of the Awami League that same year, just a few months before Ziaur Rahman's assassination. A family member of its founder also led the BNP. A few years after his interim rule as president, Abdus Sattar was in conversation to lead the party. However, some considered him too old to lead the party, leading to Khaleda Zia, Ziaur Rahman's widow, taking over the party in 1984.<sup>73</sup>

In this 1986 elections, Ershad's JP came out victorious in these elections, securing 153 of the parliament's 300 seats.<sup>74</sup> The JP's opponents questioned the results of the elections because of "widespread evidence of fraud, voter intimidation and violence" nationwide, but the results stood.<sup>75</sup> Due to these elections, Ershad could justify his rule of the country on democratic terms, but the controversy behind the elections did little to solidify Ershad's power as a legitimate ruler. Anti-Ershad unrest broke out around the country in 1987, which led to Ershad declaring a state

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<sup>72</sup> Talukder Maniruzzaman, "The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh," *Pacific Affairs* 65, no. 2 (1992): 206, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2760169>.

<sup>73</sup> Yasmeen Mohiuddin, "Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia: Bangladesh's Military Is Desperate to Bring Down These Two Former Leaders—And It's Dragging the Whole Country down with Them," *International Journal* 63, no. 2 (2008): 464–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070200806300215>.

<sup>74</sup> Firoj, 85.

<sup>75</sup> Special to The New York Times, "AROUND THE WORLD; Bangladesh Opposition Charges Vote Rigging," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1986, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/09/world/around-the-world-bangladesh-opposition-charges-vote-rigging.html>.

of emergency in November, and shutting down Bangladesh's parliament in December.<sup>76</sup> He subsequently announced a new election of the parliament in 1988, which all major opposition parties boycotted, saying that no free elections could occur with Ershad in power.<sup>77</sup> As expected given the controversial circumstances of the election, the JP won 250 of the 300 seats of the seats in parliament, further cementing the questionably democratic power of Ershad and the JP.<sup>78</sup> These two elections reflect the perilous condition that Bangladesh found itself in during the 80s. In 1987, protests calling for Ershad's resignation began to sweep through the nation, beginning with a two-day protest in Dhaka led by the country's opposition parties that led to over 50 people being wounded.<sup>79</sup> Later that year, Ershad's regime placed Zia and Hasina under house arrest in an attempt to quash both parties and their attempts to oust the military regime.<sup>80</sup>

As had occurred as his two predecessors dealt with similarly grim political, social and economic circumstances, Ershad held closer to Islam to gather support for his power as leader of the country. In 1988, Bangladesh's parliament passed the Eighth Amendment to the constitution, which formally established Islam as Bangladesh's state religion, marking a complete reversal from the constitution's original principle of secularism.<sup>81</sup> Rather than finding a reasonable mean of religious alignment, the Eighth Amendment marked Bangladesh's shift between extremes, starting with the elimination of all religious politics to the establishment of a state religion.

Ershad's total shift towards a state religion speaks to how difficult it was for any head of state in

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<sup>76</sup> "Bangladesh President Dissolves Parliament - The New York Times," accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/07/world/bangladesh-president-dissolves-parliament.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Special to the New York Times, "Violence and Strike Threaten Bangladesh Vote," *The New York Times*, March 3, 1988, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/03/world/violence-and-strike-threaten-bangladesh-vote.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Firoj, 85.

<sup>79</sup> Ap, "Bangladesh Is Torn by Violent Demands That President Quit," *The New York Times*, July 23, 1987, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/23/world/bangladesh-is-torn-by-violent-demands-that-president-quit.html>.

<sup>80</sup> "Bangladesh President Dissolves Parliament - The New York Times."

<sup>81</sup> Alam, "The State-Religion Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh – A Critique," 211–12.

Bangladesh to hold a solid grip on power in the country. It could be politically expedient to decide that a country that was 85% Muslim should embrace Islam as its official religion, connecting the purpose of the nation with a broad identity marker that could resonate with those people.

The reaction to this amendment encompassed the complicated relationship that Bangladesh had with religion since its founding. Both the Awami League and BNP opposed the amendment, with the AL promising to repeal it if placed in power, and the BNP expressing concern that it could divide the nation.<sup>82</sup> Sheikh Hasina said that the amendment was “a heinous move to destroy the spirit of [the] liberation war” and an attempt to “reunite Bangladesh with Pakistan.”<sup>83</sup> This opposition is reasonable given the Awami League’s historical affinity for secularism, with Hasina establishing a binary where Pakistan was a religious state, while Bangladesh was not. On the BNP front, this amendment aligned with Bangladeshi nationalism’s inclination to embrace Islam as a defining component of the nation’s self-expression. However, the priorities of Khaleda Zia and BNP had shifted towards keeping the state together and ending martial law, with Zia saying that Ershad’s “illegal” parliament could not pass this legislation.<sup>84</sup> Even the Jamaat-i-Islami rejected the amendment, saying that it did not go far enough in turning Bangladesh into an Islamic republic.<sup>85</sup> While Ershad’s amendment was the a nod to the demands that pro-Islamic politicians had in the 70s, by the end of the 80s, the mainstream party most

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<sup>82</sup> Alam, “State-Religion”, 215.

<sup>83</sup> Muhammad Yeahia Akhter, *Electoral Corruption in Bangladesh* (Routledge, 2017) [https://books.google.com/books?id=Uf1ADwAAQBAJ&pg=PT66&lpg=PT66&dq=%E2%80%9Ca+heinous+move+to+destroy+the+spirit+of+liberation+war%E2%80%9D,+electoral+corruption&source=bl&ots=1c3wFYK4O7&sig=ACfU3U0CT\\_PGogXkXmdzTRKh20er-dbkmg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjih-7sjq3hAhXMm-AKHfZQCr0Q6AEwAHoECAAQAQ#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9Ca%20heinous%20move%20to%20destroy%20the%20spirit%20of%20liberation%20war%E2%80%9D%2C%20electoral%20corruption&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=Uf1ADwAAQBAJ&pg=PT66&lpg=PT66&dq=%E2%80%9Ca+heinous+move+to+destroy+the+spirit+of+liberation+war%E2%80%9D,+electoral+corruption&source=bl&ots=1c3wFYK4O7&sig=ACfU3U0CT_PGogXkXmdzTRKh20er-dbkmg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjih-7sjq3hAhXMm-AKHfZQCr0Q6AEwAHoECAAQAQ#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9Ca%20heinous%20move%20to%20destroy%20the%20spirit%20of%20liberation%20war%E2%80%9D%2C%20electoral%20corruption&f=false).

<sup>84</sup> Akhter, *Electoral Corruption in Bangladesh*

<sup>85</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta, “Amidst the Winds of Change: The Hindu Minority in Bangladesh,” *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 2 (April 2012): 291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2012.664434>.



interested in endorsing it had rejected it because integrating Islam and politics was no longer as pressing of a political concern as the restoration of Bangladesh's democracy.

The years after the amendment's passage highlighted the political motivations behind it, with life not changing substantially for Hindus, Buddhists and Christians in the country. Abdur Rahman Chowdhury, who was president of the Institute of Human Rights and Legal Affairs, commented that the amendment "was more politically motivated than a matter of conviction" in an attempt to "[stretch] out his hands to Islamic nations", as opposed to a genuine attempt at Islamization. Chowdhury acknowledged how each "religion still governed by its own personal laws on marriage, divorce and such", without major changes to the life of those who were not Muslim.<sup>86</sup> During these years, Bangladesh continued to struggle from the instability it faced since its founding. The nation's rapid stray from the secular and democratic foundations it originally had made it difficult to parse out the relationship that Bangladesh wanted from religion. For almost twenty years, the shuffling of quasi-democratic and martial rulers ranging from completely secular to ardently Islamic made it difficult for the country to develop any consistent track record or discourse towards religion.

It wasn't until the late 80s when the BNP and AL, respectively, joined forces to address the longstanding democratic crisis in the nation. Under the joint leadership of the Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, mass discontent pushed Ershad out of power in the country.<sup>87</sup> From October to December of 1990, student political groups led mass protests against Ershad's regime, with protests growing more vocal as forces from the government killed and injured these protestors.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Barbara Crossette and Special To the New York Times, "Official Islam Proving Gentler in Bangladesh," *The New York Times*, February 15, 1990, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/15/world/official-islam-proving-gentler-in-bangladesh.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 95.

<sup>88</sup> Maniruzzaman, 206-08.

Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia endorsed these protests and the sentiment behind them. Eventually, Ershad resigned on December 4. The two opposition leaders elected an interim head of a caretaker government that would oversee an official parliamentary government in the country.<sup>89</sup> This caretaker government that would transfer power to the “sovereign parliament” that was elected in the 1991 elections. Under these foundations of a civil democracy, Bangladesh set forth to organize its fifth parliamentary election, the first outside of a martial law administration since 1973.<sup>90</sup> The willingness for these rivals to work together in ousting Ershad reflects how dire the circumstances of democracy had become, where determining religion’s role in the state was essentially irrelevant compared to the principle of restoring a civil democracy. While Zia and Hasina’s subsequent leadership of their two parties was more symptomatic of an volatile “dynastic democracy” that it was of an organic restoration of a functioning democracy, the effort of these two leaders helped to give Bangladesh a fresh start after almost 20 years of state instability.<sup>91</sup>

Upon its formation in 1971, Bangladesh had a myriad of economic, political and social handicaps from centuries of subordinate rule that made effective governance inherently difficult. Part of these problems stemmed from varying perspectives over Bangladesh’s sense of national identity, especially regarding the role of Islam in politics. The confluence of these phenomena led to Bangladesh’s political elites embracing Islam as a basis of validating their political authority in different ways. When Shiekh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League first enshrined secularism and Bengali nationalism within the constitution, it reflected how the party

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<sup>89</sup> Ap, “Bangladesh Picks an Interim Leader,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1990, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/06/world/bangladesh-picks-an-interim-leader.html>.

<sup>90</sup> Firoj, 85, 101.

<sup>91</sup> Ishtiaq Ahmed, *The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Routledge, 2011), 41, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/wlu/detail.action?docID=801846>.

valued inclusion and linguistic unity as political tools to gain power. Upon discovering the difficulty of governing over Bangladesh and drastically adjusting East Bengal's historical approach to religion and politics, Mujibur Rahman rapidly transitioned towards embracing Islam to appease those frustrated with him as a political and diplomatic leader. After his assassination, Ziaur Rahman led a substantial reconstruction of national identity expression rooted in Islam with his pursuit of Bangladeshi nationalism. This foil to Mujibur Rahman's secularism earned him political support among those who opposed his predecessor, including Islamist parties. Rahman's authoritarian rule prevented any substantially democratic validation of his embrace of Islam, but his transition to Bangladeshi nationalism restored Islam as a factor within the country's mainstream politics.

Ershad's presidency served as the most extreme manifestations of both phenomena. with Bangladesh facing continual turmoil at the hands of his authoritarian military regime, Ershad leaned heavily on support from Islamist parties, the diplomatic benefits of embracing Islam, and the theoretical support of Bangladesh's Muslim-majority to pursue a strong alignment with Islam, culminating with the declaration of Islam as the country's state religion in 1988. With the AL and BNP out of power and democracy in crisis, the leaders of both parties united to lead a popular uprising that ousted Ershad from power, a recognition of how the country's priorities had shifted from quelling the political volatility of negotiating the role of Islam and politics towards restoring civil democracy altogether.

## Conclusion

In its first twenty years as a nation, Bangladesh struggled economically and politically. To combat these difficulties, the nation's leaders often looked to Islam as a solution to deal with the lack of unity and political wrangling that the country's political elites were unable to adequately address. In the years after Bangladesh restored its civil democracy in 1990, the country has continued to wrestle with this dynamic. Along with the constant corruption and sharp political rivalries that had always defined Bangladesh, the restoration of a civil democracy made it harder for the country to construct national unity through any means aside from religion. A closer look at Bangladesh's democracy since 1991 shows that religion was continually used as a tool of political expediency, both by those in power and the opposition. The continued willingness of Bangladesh's mainstream parties to align with Islam in the years after restoring democracy serves as greater evidence of how the country's authoritarian leaders used Islam to deal with the country's political, social and economic instability.

Both the Awami League and BNP contested in the 1991 elections after boycotting in 1988, giving both parties their first opportunity to compete against each other in a truly democratic setting. Khaleda Zia's BNP never rejected Islam during its process of democratization, and these elections gave the party an opening to embrace an Islamic vision for the nation. Khaleda Zia's BNP rejected the premise of Bangladesh's 1972 constitution, calling it non-Islamic.<sup>1</sup> The BNP's campaign slogan, for example, translated to "There is no God but Allah, vote for the paddy-sheaf saying God the merciful", and explicit invocation of the Islamic creed of faith in relation to the BNP's primary symbol, the paddy-sheaf. Likewise, the Awami

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdous Jahan and Asif M Shahan, "Power and Influence of Islam-Based Political Parties in Bangladesh: Perception versus Reality," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 49, no. 4 (August 2014): 430, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909613488350>.

League, led by Shiekh Hasina, also embraced Islam to some extent, despite its historic secular leanings. The party's slogan translated to "There is no God but Allah, the boat belongs to Allah", an equally explicit invocation to the Islamic creed and the party's symbol.<sup>2</sup> However, despite more openly aligning with Islam on their campaign, the party also pressed to restore the 1972 constitution if elected, which included the principle of secularism.<sup>3</sup> Not only did this conflict with the party's rhetorical embrace of Islam, but it also diminished the party's authority to campaign on such a platform, especially given the BNP's historical strengths in aligning themselves with Islam as a policy tool. In Bangladesh's first election since Ershad's ousting, the BNP won 140 of the 300 seats up for election, while the AL won 88 seats, with over 62 million votes cast.<sup>4</sup>

To some, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's victory in the 1991 elections was an affirmation of Islam's strength within Bangladesh. The BNP's victory seemingly affirmed their religiously oriented vision of the nation that sharply opposed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's original view of a secular nation. On top of that, Jamaat-i-Islami, a conservative, Islamic party who wanted Bangladesh to become an Islamic Republic, won 18 seats in the election. While not a mainstream party, the success of this party heightened the majority of representatives in parliament who believed that Bangladesh should be, by some estimation, an Islamic nation.<sup>5</sup> When contrasted with the Awami League, one of the country's two major parties, only winning 93 votes, the correlation between the AL's secular stance and its loss in the country's first democratic, multi-party elections became more apparent.<sup>6</sup> However, the actual disparity between

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<sup>2</sup> Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 38-39, 152.

<sup>3</sup> Jahan and Shahan, 430.

<sup>4</sup> Jalal Firoj, "FORTY YEARS OF BANGLADESH PARLIAMENT : TRENDS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 58, no. 1 (2013): 84-86.

<sup>5</sup> Jahan and Shahan, 430.

<sup>6</sup> Firoj, 86

the two approaches was not as one-handed as the election results would suggest. The popular vote between the two parties was extremely close, with a .7% difference in the percentage of votes between the two parties, suggesting that Bangladesh itself was more divided on which approach to Islam to take than that parliamentary make up would suggest.<sup>7</sup>

After an election earlier in the year boycotted by all parties except the BNP, the Awami League was victorious in Bangladesh's next parliamentary election. The party won 146 seats of the 300 seats up for election, compared to 116 for the BNP.<sup>8</sup> On the surface, the result of these elections seemed to suggest that the Awami League had succeeded in pursuing its embrace of Islam. After 1991, Shiekh Hasina began to openly wear head scarves in public, and the party stated that it opposed laws that were antithetical to the teachings of the Quran.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Hasina said that, if elected, she did not plan to renew a friendship treaty with India, a reversal of an alliance that the BNP and Islamist parties considered antithetical to Bangladesh's Islamic heritage.<sup>10</sup> But, the party's victory cannot directly connected to these minor changes in outward action.<sup>11</sup> The BNP had struggled to lead the country forward during its first parliament, with its GDP per capita growth increasing by merely 10% over the course of its parliament.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the BNP government had dissolved Bangladesh's parliament in 1995 after mass boycotts of the body from opposition parties. After dissolving parliament, the BNP held an election in February 1996 in an attempt to shore up political power, an election that all major

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<sup>7</sup> Firoj, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Firoj, 86.

<sup>9</sup> Jahan and Shahan, 430

<sup>10</sup> Stanley A. Kochanek, "Bangladesh in 1996: The 25th Year of Independence," *Asian Survey* 37, no. 2 (1997): 139, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645479>.

<sup>11</sup> Jahan and Shahan, 430

<sup>12</sup> "GDP per Capita (Constant 2010 US\$) | Data," World Bank, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD?end=2017&locations=bd&start=1976>.

opposition parties boycotted, further damaging the party's reputation.<sup>13</sup> These failures suggest that Bangladesh's voters wished to go in a new direction when pursuing economic and political maturity, regardless of what these parties espoused religiously. To this end, the Jamaat-i-Islami only managed to win 3 of the seats up for election that year, suggesting the limited popularity of Islam as a political tool at this point.<sup>14</sup> However, the Awami League formed a coalition with the Jamaat-i-Islami and the conservative Jatiya Party, suggesting that the party would not shy away from its new alignment with Islamic politics.<sup>15</sup>

Like the BNP before it, the Awami League struggled to lead Bangladesh with its parliamentary coalition. During the AL's government, Transparency International Bangladesh named Bangladesh as the world's most corrupt country, an indictment of the country's weak democratic foundation.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the Jatiya Party left their coalition with the AL in 1997 and joined the BNP in protesting Shiekh Hasina's inability to address challenges to water access, frequent power outages and a flailing economy.<sup>17</sup> As the next parliamentary election approached in 2001, the BNP aligned with the Jamaat-i-Islami, Jatiya Party and the Islami Oikya Jote, another Islamic party, to form the four-party alliance. These parties declared a desire to defeat the Awami League's "anti-Islamic" government.<sup>18</sup> With this collection of Bangladesh's Islamicly guided parties in place, the alliance won a majority in the parliament, with the BNP, JP and Jamaat-i-Islami winning 224 total seats, compared to the Awami League's 62 seats.<sup>19</sup> As in 1991, the Awami League conflated its defeat with the four-party alliance's ability to campaign

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<sup>13</sup> Kochanek, "Bangladesh in 1996", 136-139.

<sup>14</sup> Firoj, 86

<sup>15</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 42

<sup>16</sup> Jahan and Shahan, 431.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley A. Kochanek, "Bangladesh in 1997: The Honeymoon Is Over," *Asian Survey* 38, no. 2 (1998): 136-37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645670>.

<sup>18</sup> Riaz, *God Willing*, 42

<sup>19</sup> Firoj, 86.

on Islamic policy points, instead of its inability to effectively lead Bangladesh during its time in parliamentary leadership.

The pattern of both the AL and BNP attributing their shortcomings to inadequate embraces religion as a political tool relied the same assumptions that both parties fell privy to during their leadership tenures in the 70s and 80s. Instead of looking at electoral strategies or candidate strength, both parties looked at Islam as a simple explanation for their political misfortune.<sup>20</sup> When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman noticed his authority weakening amidst economic and social disarray resulting from East Bengal's long history of colonial and pseudo-colonial rule, he responded by attempting to consolidate support around his defense of Islam as a political technology. Ziaur Rahman and General Hussein Muhammad Ershad expanded upon Mujibur Rahman's approach, combining more stringent embraces of Islam with adjustments to economic and social policies that did not completely materialize. This desire to use Islam as a solution to political, economic and social instability reflects the continued instability of Bangladesh's democratic institutions after the restoration of civil democracy. Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia built upon the precedent of using Islam to generate national unity and build political support as both leaders struggled to achieve either through policy alone.

The willingness of Bangladesh's political parties to embrace Islam stretches beyond the precedent set by these three rulers established. Indeed, it reflects the longstanding relationship that the region has had with religion and politics in the region. East Bengal has long been defined by the economic, social and political systems that placed the Muslims of Bengal in positions of subjugation under foreign empires and British colonial rule. The British exploited these differences throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the installation and reversal of the 1905

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<sup>20</sup> Jahan and Shahan, 430



partition of Bengal, a process that led to amplified political mobilization among Muslims in Bengal and across India. Politicians in East Bengal during colonialism consistently campaigned on issues like agrarian reform and economic justice for peasants, religion served as a useful cleavage for Indian Muslims and leaders to use when strengthening their base of support. Despite the correlation between Bengali Muslims and positions of political inferiority, politicians conflated these two together, leading to East Bengal choosing to align with Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision of Pakistan during partition.

East Pakistan and Bangladesh's struggle to adequately understand the role that Islam plays within politics reflects this historical disconnect between the causes of Bengali Muslim political instability and potential solutions to those issues. The Awami League's use of language and ethnicity, instead of religion, as a political technology to build support reflected the contemporary grievances that Bengali Muslims had towards Pakistan as a religious, economic and political authority. However, this was an anomaly compared to how Islam and politics had historically related to each other, rather than rapid retreat from Islam. To this end, the fact that Bangladesh's early history saw authoritarian leaders exploit religion to amass support is not all that surprising. For a leader like Ziaur Rahman use Islam to differentiate himself from his secular counterparts rejected the way that the Awami League tried to reevaluate Islam as a potential non-factor within Bangladesh's political sphere. Above all, it gave Rahman the leeway to consolidate his authority among the country's Muslim-majority. Stopping short of critically understanding the nuances of Bangladesh's Muslim-majority, the fact that Rahman acknowledged it at all aligned with the typical manner in which politics in East Bengal had historically willing to correlate the struggles of Bengali Muslims with the binding power of religion.

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