

Religion as a tool for authoritarian legitimation: The case of Bangladesh

Ali Riaz 

Department of Politics and Government,
Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois,
United States

Correspondence

Ali Riaz, Department of Politics and
Government, Illinois State University, 4600
Politics & Government, SCH Schroeder Hall
401, Normal, IL 61790-4600, USA.
Email: ariaz@ilstu.edu

Abstract

In recent decades, the relationships between religion and politics, particularly between religion and the state, have been widely discussed, yet relationships between authoritarian rulers and religion have not received their due attention. This fourth article in the 2024 *World Affairs* special issue addresses this lacuna and argues against the conventional wisdom that these two entities are always hostile to each other. The study contends that authoritarian rulers have used three strategies vis-à-vis religion as an ideology and religious actors as a political force. Autocrats have adopted repression and cooptation strategies to deal with religious actors and utilized religion as a tool of legitimation. The article offers a case study of Bangladesh which has witnessed the growing salience of religion in politics since 1976, although its 1972 constitution pledged secularism as a state principle. The article examines the strategies used during three phases of military and civilian authoritarianism—1976–1981, 1982–1990, and since 2011—and discusses the relationship between the authoritarian rulers and religion.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, Bangladesh, coercion, cooptation, Islam, legitimacy, religion and politics, South Asia, special issue

Bangladesh, which in its 1972 Constitution laid out secularism as a state principle, has witnessed a resurgence of religion in politics since 1976. Since then, religion as an ideology and religious actors as formidable forces have influenced the political landscape. During the past 50 years the country has also experienced authoritarianism of various shades. This article intends to untangle the relationship between authoritarianism and religion using three periods of its history: 1977–1980, 1982–1990, and since 2011. In the first two periods the country was ruled by military leaders, while the third phase is marked by civilian rule under an ostensibly secular party. During the third phase, democracy has eroded significantly and it is now described as an electoral authoritarian system (Bertelsmann Transformation Index [BTI], 2022). This study examines these periods and explains the strategies adopted by these regimes vis-à-vis religion. I argue that three different authoritarian regimes of Bangladesh instrumentalized religion in their legitimacy claim and used repression and cooptation as strategies to deal with religious actors. I also show that, despite

similarities in these strategies, there are differences as to which strand of Islamists the regimes have co-opted.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the existing theories on religion and the state relationship, while section two explores the religion-authoritarianism relationship; here, a framework of analysis is developed drawing on the available literature. The third section provides some background on Bangladesh, highlighting two aspects: religion's role in politics and the pathway of democracy. The fourth section explains the strategies of the regimes during the periods under study. I finally present some concluding remarks.

1 | THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

Normative discussion on the relations between religion and politics has a long history in sociology and political philosophy, particularly in the works of Marx (1843/2012), Emile Durkheim (1912/1995), and Weber (1905/2002).

However, the topic remained on the periphery of political studies. Based on this tradition of sociology, in the 1960s, the dominant perspective was that religion would retreat from social and political life; consequently, secularism would be the destination of humanity's development (Berger, 1969). But it was increasingly understood that religion was bound to return to the public arena, including the political space (Casanova, 2001; Juergensmeyer, 1993). Since the late 1970s, it has been accepted that religion will continue to exist in various forms (Fox & Sandal, 2013, p. 2) and influence domestic politics (Haynes, 1994) and international relations (Snyder, 2011). Casanova (1994) argued that in the 1980s religion was “deprivatized” in a number of countries around the world. Similarly, Hadden (1987) challenged the basis of the claims that religion was supposed to lose ground and insisted that these claims were based on a doctrine rather than from systematic inquiry. Berger (1999), in a *mea culpa*, argued passionately that “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false.” As the secularization thesis faced challenges and newer interpretations of secularization became evident in the 1980s, literature on religion-politics relations came to light. Two other factors contributed to the attention to religion: “the increasing methodological sophistication of specialists in this subfield” and “real-world events” (Bellin, 2008).

One of the strands of the discussion exclusively focused on the role of the state vis-à-vis religion. These discussions understood religion as both a value system and a set of institutions but focused more on the latter. Such a relationship is often described as “Church-state relations” and is premised on the implicit Anglo-American perspective that there is one Church (i.e., religion) and one state (Haynes, 1991, p. 8). Within this frame, the nature of the state is divided into five categories based on a relationship between state and religion. They are: confessional, generally religious, established religion, liberal secular, and Marxist secular (Haynes, 1991, p. 10). In the confessional state-religion model, divine power supersedes secular power; in a generally religious polity, religion acts as a guide but no particular religion receives favors from the state. In the established faith/religion model, the state has an official faith/church, but society remains secular, and the voice of the faith institution remains on the margin. The largest number of states, in general understanding, belong to the fourth model—the “liberal secular model” that “encapsulates the notion of secular power holding sway over religion” and “distance, detachment and separation” between these two entities is clearly made through the constitution, laws, and policies (Haynes, 1991, p. 10). The fifth model is where the state banishes religion from the public sphere, in some instances even from the private sphere.

The “liberal-secular model” which became dominant in the 20th century and presupposed a democratic

polity as an integral element of the system, was ideally supposed to maintain a distance with religion. Yet, the religion and state (RAS) data for the years between 1990 and 2014 of 183 states show that 43 (23.5%) countries have official religions (Fox, 2018, p. 131). Having official religions—and in other instances where states effectively prefer one religion over others—indicates that religion has remained a part of politics and governance. It is also indicative of the desire of the state to control religion. As such, discussions on religion-state relations have been dominated by inquiries as to how the state controls religion. The policies can be broadly divided into two: supportive and restrictive. There are significant variations within both categories. For example, supportive policies can range from having an official religion to accommodating religions while restrictive policies include hostility toward religion and state-controlled negative attitudes (Fox, 2018, p. 138).

While these available data and analyses have shown the relationship between religion and state, there is little discussion on making distinctions between democratic and undemocratic states. Authoritarian regimes have been a part of the global political landscape for a long time, yet there has been little academic endeavor on whether the relationship between religion and the state is different in an authoritarian system. Simply stated, the way an authoritarian system deals with religion has remained understudied. In recent years, some authors have drawn attention to this lacuna (Kettell, 2013; Schleutker, 2016). Studies about Turkey have shed some light on the issue (e.g., Öztürk, 2019).

The necessity for this distinction has gained further urgency because of the erosion of democracy worldwide (Freedom House, 2023). In the past 17 years, democratic backsliding has resulted in the emergence of new autocratic regimes and also engendered a new kind of regime called the hybrid regime. These are the regimes which combine both democratic and authoritarian traits: for example, frequent and direct elections together with high levels of political repression and exclusion. Hybrid regimes are to a large extent electoral authoritarianism. In this kind of system, the incumbent gains and retains power through the electoral process, although these elections are often highly manipulated.

2 | RELIGION AND AUTHORITARIANISM: THREE STRATEGIES

For a long time, in existing literature the relationship between religion and authoritarianism has been viewed as conflictual, in many instances hostile to each other. Each would like to see the other being subordinated and rendered ineffective. Koesel (2014, pp. 2–4)

identified four reasons for such a discordant relationship between these two entities. First, they represent competing centers of authority; second, due to lack of legitimacy authoritarian rulers tend to coopt religious institutions, ideologies, and actors; third, as a member of civil society, religious institutions and actors become important vehicles of mobilization when other civil society institutions are severely weakened; and fourth, often religious ideologies and identities serve as sources of violence. As for the autocrats, it is assumed that they see the religious elites (e.g., clerics) as having two special features which make them distinctly different from others and a more potent threat to their power. These two features are:

first, they hold values regarding social justice and human rights, or regarding proper behavior as prescribed by their religion; second, as representatives of the supernatural world and as wise men possessing deep knowledge (theological and philosophical, in particular), they have a natural prestige and exert great influence on the population. (Auriol & Platteau, 2016, p. 7)

Based on these understandings, the relationship has not been explored beyond the binary frame. However, in recent years, this binary approach has been challenged. The shift has largely taken place due to a growing body of literature on authoritarian regimes, especially on their survival strategies, and distinctions between various kinds of authoritarianism. It is now well documented that not all authoritarian systems are alike; beside closed authoritarianism, electoral authoritarian systems have arisen (Schedler, 2006: for a review of the literature see Morse, 2012) which has two different subsystems: competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010), and hegemonic authoritarianism (Diamond, 2002). These discussions have called for a more nuanced understanding not only about how authoritarian rulers survive, but also how they deal with social forces. Since the publication of Gerschewski's (2013) essay that advanced the thesis that stability of autocracies rests on three pillars—legitimation, repression, and cooptation—studies have used this framework to explain the behaviors of authoritarian rulers in dealing with opposition. I build my arguments on the relationship between religion and authoritarian rulers in Bangladesh upon this framework.

Repression is the key strategy of authoritarian rulers, but repression alone is not sufficient to keep autocrats in power. Studies on classical closed authoritarianism have underscored that autocrats adopt various strategies. These include divide-and-rule (e.g., de Luca et al., 2014; Acemoglu et al., 2004), power-sharing and bargaining (e.g., Lizzeri & Persico, 2004; Morelli & Rohner, 2014), and optimal succession rules (Konrad & Mui, 2015;

Konrad & Skaperdas, 2007). These strategies have been broadly divided into two categories: repression and cooptation (Auriol & Platteau, 2016, p. 8; Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014). These two strategies address dissent and consequently contribute to the stability of the regime.

Repression and cooptation are concepts have been variously defined by scholars. Davenport (2007) defines repression as “actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities.” This includes “harassment, surveillance/spying, bans, arrests, torture, and mass killing by government agents and/or affiliates within their territorial jurisdiction” (Davenport, 2007). These measures can be taken through legal means by using existing laws and creating new ones, and through extralegal measures, such as extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2014, p. 332) describe repression as “a form of sociopolitical control.” As such, the repression can be actualized beyond the political realm. One of the emerging forms of repression, especially in electoral authoritarian regimes, is by creating a fear of potential legal and extralegal punitive measures, which can be described as a construction of a culture of fear. Culture of fear means that the relationship between the citizens and state is shaped by fear of being persecuted by the state, forcing the citizens to comply with the state's *diktat*. When fear becomes the dominant trait of relationships and permeates society, it becomes a self-reproducing mechanism which is best described as a culture of fear (Riaz, 2022).

Cooptation, described by Geddes (1999, pp. 130–138) as the “decisive causal mechanism” of regime survival, is understood as “the capacity to tie strategically relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite” (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 22). It is also described as the “intentional extension of benefits to potential challengers to the regime in exchange of their loyalty” (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014, p. 333). The primary role of cooptation is twofold: expansion of the support base of the regime and creating vested interests in the coopted groups in the survival of the regime (Schleutker, 2016). However, cooptation should not be conceptualized as a one-way system where the patron is the only beneficiary, and that the recipient has to offer unconditional support to the regime. Instead, the cooptation can become a bargain between the two parties with the regime having the upper hand because cooptation is backed by the potential threat of repression. Cooptation also has the potential to influence the regime's behavior. Cooptation is a sustained relationship. Both Juan Linz (1964) and Joshua Stacher (2012) have emphasized this aspect. In Linz's (1964, p. 300) words, cooptation is “a constant process.” Considering

that it is a process, breakdown at any point is possible and either party can break off the relationship, which has its costs. Drawing on the work of Magaloni (2008), Franz and Kendall-Taylor (2014, p. 335) remind us that there is no guarantee that the recipient will not use the resources it has received from the regime to strengthen its own coalition and challenge the ruler.

Cooptation is often described as “distribution of monetary rewards” (Franz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014, p. 335), but cooptation not only involves material/monetary benefits from the regime to the recipient; it can also be in the form of policy concessions on the part of authoritarian rulers (Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006). Discussions on cooptation strategy in electoral authoritarian regimes have largely focused on institutional aspects; that is, the cooptation of political parties and allowing coopted groups and parties to have a seat in the legislative bodies. But these are neither exclusive nor exhaustive of how cooptation works and who are coopted. In many instances, authoritarian regimes tend to rely on informal mechanisms of cooptation. This is particularly important for societies where informal ties carry more weight and personalistic authoritarian systems exist. Informal mechanisms of cooptation are relevant for the cooptation of religious groups and actors, particularly when various groups claim to represent the religious sector.

While both repression and cooptation are widely used strategies of authoritarian rulers, the most important mechanism of survival is the legitimation mechanism; that is, the claim of legitimacy to rule. Legitimacy is the central element of governance. It determines not only how the country is ruled, but also what the nature of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is—yet legitimacy has remained one of the most contentious concepts. Any ruler, be they democratic or nondemocratic, can claim that s/he has the right to rule and provide justifications for this claim. In democratic society, elections serve as the principal source of the claim, but ideology, institutions, and procedures serve as other major elements. In the case of authoritarian rulers, the claim to legitimacy through elections remains tenuous at best. Closed authoritarian

systems, although holding elections, develop other justifications for their claim. In electoral authoritarianism, elections are held in a manner that ensures the victory of the incumbent, thus they provide a veneer of democratic legitimacy but this essentially remains a hollow claim.

The process of claiming legitimacy is described as legitimation (or legitimization) and is important in understanding how an authoritarian system works. This is a process rather than a fixed event. In the past decade there has been renewed interest in legitimacy and a wide array of studies have been published on how authoritarian rulers make the legitimacy claim and how it impacts the durability of the regime (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Josua, 2016; Kailitz & Stockemer, 2017; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). As there are variations of authoritarianism, their legitimation mechanisms similarly vary; however, it is also evident that these regimes are not entirely dependent on the election as the only source of their legitimacy claim. Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017) suggested four mechanisms followed by the authoritarian regimes, von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) insisted that there are six, including both domestic and international dimensions. In general, drawing on the available literature and case studies of authoritarian regimes, we can divide the legitimation mechanisms into three broad categories: institutional, performance, and ideological (see Table 1).

Notwithstanding the importance of the repression and cooptation mechanisms as separate entities, I have included them in the broad category of institutional mechanisms. Among the ideological mechanisms, nationalism features significantly but religion can be, and in many instances is, used as a crucial element. Discussions on Turkey (Öztürk, 2019) and Tunisia (Dell'Aguzzo & Sigillò, 2017) amply demonstrate that politicized religion can perform as an ideology.

The preceding discussion shows that authoritarian rulers adopt three mechanisms to maintain stability and control, oppositional ideology, and actors and that they are institutional, performance, and ideological. Religion and religious actors fall into the ideological mechanism. In the next section, I examine the case of Bangladesh during its three periods of authoritarianism.

TABLE 1 Legitimation mechanisms of authoritarianism.

Institutional	Performance	Ideological
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manipulation of electoral processes • Controlling information • Personalization of power/ executive aggrandizement • Controlling opposition through repression and cooptation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic success and welfare mechanism • Maintaining law and order • Protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity construction • Reframing the history • Nationalist sentiments • Ethnic divide • Politicized religion

Source: Compiled by author.

3 | RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH

Analysis of the relationship between religion and state under authoritarian regimes in Bangladesh requires discussion on two aspects of the history of Bangladesh: (a) how the question of religion has played out over the past 50 years and (b) the pathway of democracy. In this section, I briefly discuss these two aspects before examining the strategies used by three regimes regarding religion. As mentioned previously, I have selected three regimes—the Ziaur Rahman regime (1975–1981), the Ershad regime (1982–1990), and since 2011, the incumbent Hasina regime.

3.1 | The religion–state relationship

The relationship between the Bangladeshi state and religion has changed in the past 50 years where the state has increasingly taken an active role in the religious realm, and religion—especially Islam—has influenced the state's behavior. In postindependence Bangladesh, the constitution framed in 1972 declared “secularism” as one of the state principles, promised the neutrality of the state regarding religion, and proscribed religion-based political parties. These institutional measures created an impression that the institutional arrangement between religion and politics had been settled in favor of an unequivocal banishment of religion from the public sphere and that religion had been consigned to the private realm. The constitution further stipulated the religious freedom of all communities. The original constitution, in explaining the tenets of secularism, underscored that “patronization by the state of any particular religion” and “discrimination against, and persecution of, anyone following a particular religion” (Article 12) would be ended. Therefore, according to one narrative of the history, Bangladesh did away with the mix of religion and politics. From this perspective, secularism was interpreted as a binary opposite to religion. This was presented as an integral part of the ethno-linguistic Bengali nationalism (Ahmed, 2004; Anisuzzaman, 1993, 1995; Jahangir, 2002; Khatun, 2010). This perspective did not recognize the internal tensions and misunderstanding surrounding secularism and claimed that “secularism” represented the aspirations of the masses.

The perceived settlement between religion and politics and the promise of a secular state was reversed in 1977. The military regime of Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981), which came into power after a military coup in 1975, brought changes to the state principles. In April 1977, soon after the assumption of the office of president, Ziaur Rahman made some constitutional amendments through a proclamation. This included the deletion of secularism as a state principle. The word “secularism,” was substituted with “absolute trust and

faith in the Almighty Allah,” and a new clause (1A) was inserted to emphasize that “absolute trust and faith in almighty Allah” should be “the basis of all actions.” Article 12, which defined “secularism,” was omitted, and above the preamble, the words “*Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim*” (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) were inserted in the constitution. These changes were incorporated into the constitution in April 1979. These steps were preceded by the promulgation of the Political Parties Ordinance in 1976 which reintroduced the multiparty system but also provided the space for Islamist parties to reappear in the political landscape. It allowed, among others, the re-emergence of the *Jamaat-i-Islami* (JI), the largest Islamist party which opposed the founding of independent Bangladesh (Mostofa, 2021a). Ziaur Rahman's successor, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982–1990), who usurped state power in 1982 through another coup, declared Islam the state religion in 1988. He also had changed the weekly holiday from Sunday to Friday, and frequently visited mosques and *mazars* (shrines), adhered to *pirs* (saints), and underscored the role of Islam in daily lives. During the pro-democracy movement against the Ershad regime between 1982 and 1990, the JI participated in the popular movement along with the two major political parties: the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL). Consequently, the JI gained a position at the forefront of Bangladeshi politics.

After the downfall of the Ershad regime in 1990, political parties with an Islamist agenda proliferated and the Islamist political landscape became fragmented as diverse types of Islamist parties emerged (Riaz, 2021a, p. 88). Between 1991 and 2006, as power alternated between the two major parties, the BNP and the BAL, the JI switched sides until it formed an alliance with the BNP in 1999. Essentially, it became the “kingmaker.” The BNP-JI alliance, with another Islamist party, Islamic Oikyo Jote (IOJ), came to power in 2001. The BNP, established in 1978, considered Islam as a part of the national identity; consequently, religion, religious rhetoric, and religious symbolism became an integral part of its political discourse. In a similar vein, the BAL adopted this rhetoric and increasingly became adept in using it to their advantage and had no hesitation befriending Islamists (Riaz, 2004). In 2006, ahead of the scheduled elections in early 2007 (which were later postponed), the BAL signed a memorandum of understanding with a radical Islamist party called the *Khilafat-i-Majlish* promising to enact a blasphemy law and make *fatwas* (religious edicts) legally binding.

The highest court of the country declared in 2005 that the removal of secularism from the constitution was illegal. The 15th Amendment of the Constitution, passed in 2011, restored secularism as the state principle while retaining Islam as the state religion

and *Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim* in the preamble of the constitution. Therefore, the relationship between state and religion remained close, although these constitutional provisions created a serious ambiguity.

The religion question again came to the forefront in 2013, in the wake of the verdicts delivered by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a national tribunal set up by the BAL to try those who had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during the War of Independence in 1971. A movement called *Gonojagom Mancho* emerged demanding the capital punishment of those convicted. Most of those who were charged and tried belonged to the JI. The JI and the BNP called the trial “politically motivated” to undermine the opposition. As the verdicts in the trials against the JI leaders were being delivered, the JI unleashed violent protests throughout the country and the government adopted heavy-handed measures in clear violation of the fundamental rights of the citizens.

It is against these developments that *Hefazat-i-Islam* (HI), an umbrella organization of conservative Islamists, appeared on the political scene in 2013. The HI was established in 2011 but rose to prominence in 2013 (Mostofa, 2021b; Parvez, 2021; Riaz, 2017, pp. 107–138; Zaman, 2018). The HI demanded that the government introduce the blasphemy law to punish those who insulted Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. The HI also described the *Gonojagom Mancha* as un-Islamic, alleged that the organizers of the movement had insulted Islam, and described them as “atheists.” The HI demanded that the movement be disbanded. The HI initially appeared as a challenge to the government’s “secular policies,” including the Women’s Development Policy. After facing a brutal assault on May 5, 2013, the HI regrouped, mended its differences with the ruling party, and began to put pressure on the government. The ruling party began to succumb to the pressure and accepted some of the demands between January and May 2017. In the meantime, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared that the country would be governed by the Medina Charter.¹ In 2018, ahead of the election, Hasina was given a grand reception by the HI and conferred the title “Mother of the Qwami.” On the legal front, an attempt to challenge the status of Islam as the state religion was rejected by the High Court in March 2016, when a petition filed in 1988 came before the Court. Ostensibly, the petition was rejected on technical grounds, but the implication maintained an odd combination of religion and secularism in the constitution. The HI began to face the wrath of the government in December 2020, when it protested the building of the statue of Sheikh Mujib, alleging that it was un-Islamic (Mahmud, 2021) and

when it protested the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2021 (Aljazeera, 2021).

3.2 | Democracy's tumultuous journey

Although the democratic aspirations of the ethnic Bengali population of then East Pakistan produced an ethno-linguistic nationalism in the 1960s which led to the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971, the country’s democratic journey has been tumultuous since then. Severe fluctuations in the three indicators—the liberal democracy index, the political rights index, and the civil liberties index—between 1972 and 2022 demonstrate the rough journey of the nation (see Figure 1).

The promise of a Westminster-style democracy stipulated in the constitution was shelved within less than three years of the constitution coming into force. A short-lived one-party authoritarian system was introduced in January 1975 by the incumbent BAL under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (hereafter Mujib). The era ended with the brutal murder of Mujib, most of his family members, and his close associates as Bangladesh faced its first military rule.

After the coup and countercoup of 1975, General Ziaur Rahman (hereafter Zia) emerged as the strongman and rose to power. Although he officially assumed the presidency in 1977, since November 1975 he was the de facto ruler of the country. Until Zia was killed in an abortive coup in May 1980, the era was marked by a military authoritarian system of governance. He took several measures to legitimize his rule. These included the introduction of multiparty politics (in 1976), holding a referendum (in 1977), launching a political party (in 1978), and holding a parliamentary election (in 1979). He also amended the constitution (from 1976 to 1979), shifted the foreign policy orientation of the country toward the Western nations and Muslim countries, encouraged private entrepreneurship, and privatized state-owned enterprises. Beyond these institutional

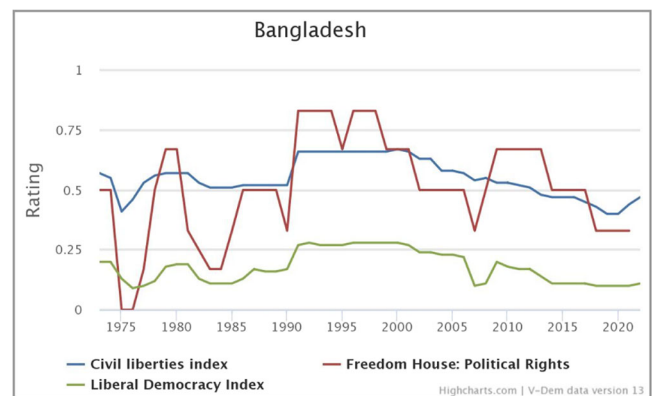


FIGURE 1 State of democracy in Bangladesh, 1972–2022. Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute database.

¹The Medina Charter was a 622 CE document produced under Prophet Muhammad shortly after his arrival to Medina, laying out the Islamic principles of governance.

and performance-based legitimation efforts, he focused on the ideational domain with the introduction of a new brand of nationalism that blended territoriality and religion (i.e., Bangladeshi and Muslim) as opposed to ethno-linguistic (Bengali) is the most important ideas. As mentioned before, the Zia regime opened the political space for Islamists and brought the question of religion to the forefront of political discourse.

General H.M. Ershad's regime (1982–1990) was largely an attempt to emulate Zia's style of governance through a referendum (in 1985), launching a political party (in 1986), and holding a presidential election (in 1986) and two parliamentary elections (in 1987 and 1988). But his efforts failed due to the pro-democracy movement spearheaded by the students. Three alliances of the political parties led by the BNP, the BAL, and the leftist parties, plus the participation of the JI prevented the Ershad regime from offering stability. An urban popular uprising brought an end to his rule in December 1990. In addition to these institutional steps, he introduced local-level elected councils called *upazilla parishad* (subdistrict councils). As for the ideational aspect, he frequently referred to Islam as the guiding principle and added Islam as the state religion to the constitution.

With the downfall of the Ershad regime, the democratization process began in 1991 and in the initial years it fulfilled five key indicators of electoral democracy: suffrage, elected officials, clean elections, freedom of association, and freedom of expression and alternative sources of information, as identified by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem, 2018, p. 71). After more than 15 years of a presidential system, the country reverted to a parliamentary system. A competitive, multiparty political system with universal adult suffrage and regularly contested elections pointed to a promising start. The media became relatively free and promises of an independent judiciary were reiterated by all parties, particularly the two major parties—the incumbent BNP and the opposition BAL. These were the hallmarks of an electoral democracy. These two parties were elected to power alternately through relatively fair elections until 2008. However, democratic institutions remained fragile and the authoritarian tendencies of political leaders were easily discernible. The failure of both parties to build strong democratic institutions created a democratic culture and their engagement in incessant acrimony added to the fragility and gradual erosion of democracy. Both demonstrated a proclivity toward a dominant party system, “which refers to a category of parties or political organizations (sic) that have successively secured election victories and whose defeat is unlikely for the foreseeable future” (Laws, 2016). The constitutional amendment that reintroduced the parliamentary system in 1991 had also provided unbridled power to the prime minister. With the prime minister as the head of

the party, the leader of the house, and the leader of the parliamentary party, executive aggrandizement was a natural consequence.

In the face of street agitations by the opposition led by the BAL, the BNP amended the constitution and incorporated the provision of the caretaker government (CTG) to oversee the election. The 13th Constitutional Amendment, passed in 1996, ensured that free and fair elections were held upon completion of the term of the incumbent and provided safeguards against the manipulation of elections. With no other accountability mechanism in place and the increasing politicization of state institutions, elections remained the only means for keeping the incumbent in check. With the trust deficit among major parties, the nonpartisan CTG was the best option to ensure a peaceful constitutional transfer of power. However, in late 2006, ahead of the election scheduled in January 2007, law and order broke down as the opposition led by the BAL launched street agitations to prevent the immediate-past Chief Justice from becoming the head of the CTG, while the incumbent BNP engaged in machinations to influence the forthcoming election (Riaz, 2014). In the crisis, the military staged a promissory coup, a form of military intervention which “frame[d] the ouster of an elected government as a defense of democratic legality and ma[d]e a public promise to hold elections and restore democracy as soon as possible” (Bermeo, 2016, p. 8). After a failed attempt to reform the political system, and banished from politics and unable address corruption issues, Prime Ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina led the CTG to hand over power through a general election held in December 2008 amid growing disillusionment with the government, the Asian economic crisis, and external pressure. The BAL secured a landslide victory in the December 2008 election.

With a three-fourths majority in the parliament, the BAL began to adopt measures since 2010 which were designed to incrementally weaken the opposition, make elections ineffective, muzzle the press, and create a culture of fear. The turning point became the constitutional amendment in 2011 that removed the CTG provisions from the constitution. The CTG provision that allowed a nonpartisan government to oversee the election led to four free, fair, and inclusive elections, in 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008. In June 2011 the incumbent scrapped the CTG provision from the constitution. The argument for the ruling BAL was that a verdict of the Supreme Court had voided the system. The verdict in question had declared the 13th Amendment unconstitutional, prospectively. However, the verdict also insisted that the next two parliamentary elections could be “held under the provisions of the above-mentioned 13th Amendment.” A parliamentary committee comprised of BAL members also favored continuing the system, but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina decided otherwise. The new provision

stipulated that the parliamentary election would be held under the incumbent government. The BNP and all opposition parties threatened to boycott the election unless the CTG system was restored. The BNP and the opposition made good on their threat and boycotted the election held on January 5, 2014. Deletion of this provision enabled the incumbent to remain in power with all the tools at its disposal to manipulate the electoral process. Without an independent electoral commission and growing politicization of civil administration, the provision created an uneven field for the opposition (Riaz, 2014, 2016, pp. 88–102). With no opposition candidates, the result of the election was a forgone conclusion. More than half of the parliament members, 153 candidates of the ruling party and its allies, were elected unopposed. It created a parliament with no opposition.

The consequences were not only limited to the 2014 election. They also influenced the election five years later. In the December 2018 election, although the BNP and other opposition parties participated, the deck was stacked against them. Weakened by years of persecution and the entire administration, including the Election Commission and the law enforcing agencies working in favor of the incumbent, the election delivered an unprecedented victory to the BAL. Of the 300 parliamentary seats, 288 were won by the ruling party and its allies. The election was described by the *New York Times* (2019) as ‘farcical’ and by the *Economist* (2019) as “transparently fraudulent.” As such, two consecutive parliamentary elections were manipulated to create parliaments with no opposition, the legislative body became subservient to the executive.

The country had already begun to see the signs of a competitive authoritarianism since the early 2000s, but the 2011 Constitutional Amendment paved the path toward a hegemonic electoral authoritarianism (Riaz, 2021b). The precipitous decline in the three

indicators captures the scale of the democratic backsliding since 2010; these are the overall scores of the country according to Freedom House (see Figure 2), and the scores of fairness of election and the right to peaceful assembly according to the Varieties of Democracy Institute (see Figure 3).

Combined with the 15th Amendment, the incumbent BAL has adopted other institutional, legal, and extra-legal measures to maintain its hold over power. These include the enactment of a draconian law to stifle freedom of expression, establishing control over the judiciary through the 16th Amendment, and high numbers of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Taken together, these have transformed the country into an autocracy (BTI, 2022). As with any authoritarian system, there have been performance and ideational mechanisms of legitimacy claims on the part of the incumbent. Economic growth of the past decade has been portrayed as the justification for the continuation of the current authoritarian system of

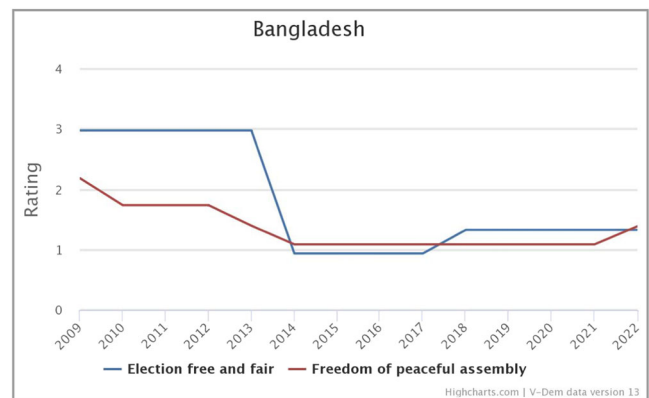


FIGURE 3 Election fairness and freedom of peaceful assembly in Bangladesh, 2009–2022. *Source:* Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute database.

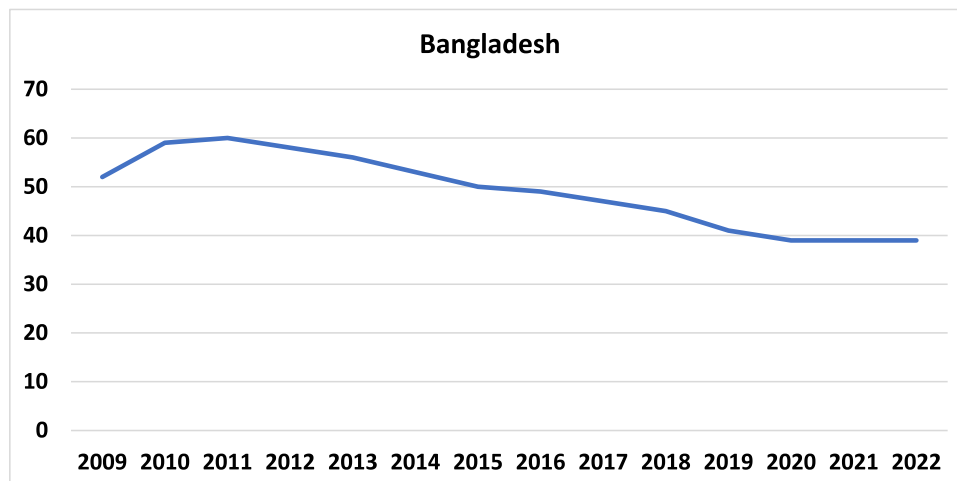


FIGURE 2 Overall democracy score of Bangladesh, 2009–2022. *Source:* Annual reports of the Freedom House, 2010–2023.

governance through a contrived debate on development versus democracy. As for the ideational aspect, the regime has weaponized patriotism through a nebulous idea of the “spirit of liberation war.” Any dissent over the interpretation of the regime and its supporters was countered with the notion that the ideals and spirits of the war of independence had been criminalized. One of these ideational elements has been religion.

4 | STRATEGIES OF AUTHORITARIAN RULERS IN BANGLADESH

Authoritarian rulers do not use one single mechanism for their legitimacy claims and regime survival, instead they adopt a combination of various mechanisms broadly defined as institutional, performance, and ideational. The description of Bangladesh's democratic journey demonstrated that the Bangladeshi authoritarian regimes (1975–1981, 1982–1990, and 2011 to date), headed by General Zia, General Ershad, and Sheikh Hasina, respectively, were no different. Amending the constitution, holding fraudulent elections, constructing or reconstituting a new national identity, and tapping into nationalist sentiment to various degrees have been their hallmarks. Among the ideational mechanisms was the instrumentalization of religion as a tool for legitimation. Instrumentalization, in this instance, is understood as the use of religion to mobilize supporters with a political objective which does not pertain to a theological aspect of religion, and to obtain and/or retain political power. Often such efforts are made through general appeals to identity, or appeals to religious teachings, or a combination of the two. In the case of both regimes, Islam is portrayed as an integral part of the national identity.

However, one significant difference between the Zia and Ershad regimes, on the one hand, and the incumbent regime of Sheikh Hasina, on the other, should be underscored: the nature of the regimes. Despite civilianization efforts characterized by the participation of civilian political leaders in the cabinet, the launching of political parties, holding elections, and allowing political space for the opposition, power primarily rested with the military under the Zia and Ershad regimes. On the other hand, the Hasina regime, since 2010, has relied more on elections as the primary mode of legitimation and developed a combination of party-military-civilian bureaucracy as the center of power. The primacy of elections coupled with a disregard for democratic practices have made the Hasina government an electoral authoritarian system.

Mostofa and Subedi (2020) argue that the electoral authoritarian regime in Bangladesh relies on four strategies to legitimize the regime: electoral

manipulation, marginalization of political opposition, cooptation of religious leaders, and institutionalization of authoritarian policies. Discussions on the transformation of the Bangladeshi governance system since 2009 clearly show that the autocratization process involved institutional changes such as amending the constitution and capturing the judiciary, along with reconstructing the ideology (Riaz, 2019, 2021b). Manipulation of the constitution and electoral processes, control over the judiciary and the construction of a nationalist ideology have been used for regime stability. The role of religion as a legitimation tool by various regimes has been discussed by Hakim (1998).

The increasing influence of religion in Bangladeshi politics, particularly since 1976, clearly shows that the ruling parties have dealt with religion and religious actors. After the democratization process began in 1991, Islamists had carved out a space for themselves, yet the governments between 1991 and 2006 did not have to ideologically rely on the Islamists for their legitimation and did not require the instrumentalization of religion as a tool for legitimation. During this period the BNP and the BAL had been in power alternatively and worked closely with the Islamist parties. Between 2001 and 2006, the ruling coalition had two Islamist parties as partners. The situation was akin to the Middle East described by Schlumberger (2010, p. 241): they have “paid tribute to religion in various ways so as not to be considered ‘un-Islamic,’ [but] the structures or patterns of domestic legitimacy were nevertheless based on other issues—mostly ideology and welfare.” The state-religion relationship was largely mediated through procedural measures.

Significant actions with respect to religion and religious actors of the regimes under consideration are listed in Table 2.

The Zia regime had adopted cooptation and legitimation strategies as it allowed the Islamist parties to reemerge on the political scene and made constitutional changes that brought religion to the forefront of national identity. These measures were framed as efforts to create an inclusive and consensual politics. Juridico-legal measures such as elections were not sufficient to provide ideological legitimacy to the regime. The Zia regime had adopted repressive measures against its opposition; particularly against the *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal* (JSD) which was instrumental in putting him in power (Lifschultz, 1979), a segment of leftist parties, and rebellious factions of the military. However, the regime did not adopt any repressive measures against Islamists. Instead, it thrust religion into the limelight through various symbolic measures: for example, displaying Qur'anic verses in public places including government offices, projecting principles of Islam including Sharia (Islamic laws), and broadcasting *azan* (call for prayers) five times a day through radio and television channels.

TABLE 2 Religion and state relationships under authoritarian and electoral authoritarian regimes (1976–2023).

Regime	Actions	Strategy
Ziaur Rahman, 1977–1981	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Removal of secularism as the state principle and inclusion of “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah” and “<i>bismillahir-rahman-ar-rahim</i>” (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) in the preamble of the constitution (1978). b. Removal of the ban on the formation and operation of religion-based political parties (1978). c. Extensive use of Islamic symbols and expressions in public speeches, patronization of Islamic education and cultural events, official celebration of religious festivals. d. Construction of a new national identity with religion as an element e. Shifting foreign policy focus and alignment and building close relationship with Muslim-majority countries, especially in the Middle East and the Gulf. f. Creation of the Division on Religious Affairs as a new administrative unit 	Cooptation, Legitimation
Ershad Regime, 1982–1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Incorporation of Islam as the state religion (1988) b. Making Friday the weekly holiday (1984) c. Proposed education policy (1982) which included Arabic as a mandatory subject at the primary level as a means to know and practice Islam, “I want children to read Quran in Arabic, remember Allah,” he said in December 1982. d. Encouragement of madrasa (Islamic seminaries) education and providing support to the sector through creation of separate directorate within the education ministry; and creation of the Zakat fund under the state auspices. e. Highlighting the Muslim identity through state sponsored programs and state-owned media, and diatribe against Bengali-ethnic cultural activities f. Frequent visitation of shrines, declaration of being a devotee of pirs (Islamic saints) and visiting one particular pir regularly, visitation of mosques; helping pirs play a role in politics. 	Legitimation, Cooptation (?)
Hasina Regime, 2011–2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Fervently acting against one of the Islamist parties (2010 onward) b. Kept the state religion in the constitution, although secularism was reinstated as one of state principles (2011) c. Allowing a conservative Islamist group to gain strength (2013) d. Acting against secular bloggers for allegedly hurting religious sentiment using a restrictive law practically making it an “anti-blasphemy” law (2013) e. Taking actions against the conservative Islamist group (2013) f. Declaration that the country will be governed as per “Medina Charter” (2014) g. Warning for state officials to bloggers against hurting religious sentiment (2015) h. Revisioning school textbooks as demanded the conservative Islamist group (2017) i. Recognizing the highest degree of privately operated Deobandi madrasas (qwami) equivalent to master's without any reforms (2017) j. Removal of the statue of Lady Justice from the premise of the Supreme Court as demanded by the conservative Islamist group (2017) k. Acceptance of a public reception by Hasina from the conservative Islamists, where they conferred her the title “the mother of qwami” (2018) l. Arrests of the leaders of the conservative Islamist group after demonstration against Indian PM's visit (2021). m. Repeated references to Qur'anic texts as justification for supporting the regime. 	Repression, Cooptation, Legitimation

Since assuming power, General Ershad faced resistance from political parties and a severe crisis of legitimacy. To embolden his legitimacy claim, Ershad began using Islamic rhetoric and proclaimed that “Bangladesh is a country of the Muslims and the struggle this time is to establish an Islamic Bangladesh” (Kabir, 2006, p. 38). The majoritarian inevitability of Bangladesh becoming an Islamic state was the central element of Ershad's justification for instrumentalizing

religion. His goal was to use religion to garner support among the wider population. His regime's repressive measures against the opposition spared the Islamists for two reasons: his reliance on economic support from the Middle East and Gulf states (Kabir, 2006, p. 38) and to coopt the Islamists. However, his religious rhetoric and various steps had very little success in coopting Islamists. In 1988, when he incorporated Islam as a state religion in the constitution, only a handful of

conservative individuals and Islamist groups extended support. These included the Pir of Atarashi and Sharsina. Despite having a large number of followers, none had succeeded in wooing them to support Ershad. On the other hand, the largest Islamist party (the JI) rejected this as a hypocritical move to resist a genuine Islamic movement (Hakim, 1998). The Ershad regime had some success in coopting secular leaders and many of them joined his party and the cabinet, but it made very little headway among Islamists and citizens at large.

The Ershad regime's strategy to coopt Islamists exhibited a marked difference to the strategy of the Zia regime. Ershad had targeted the conservative and orthodox Islamists as the forces to be coopted while Zia tried to woo the modernist elements. Orthodox/conservatives are largely represented by the rural population. Islamic movements in Bangladesh have a long history of two traditions: one is represented by Western educated Islamic scholars and Islamists while the other is represented by *ulema* trained in traditional Islamic seminaries of the Deobandi tradition (Hashmi, 2004; Kabir, 2012; Riaz, 2009). However, since the independence of Bangladesh, although the *ulema* had maintained significant sway in the daily lives of the rural population, they had very little political clout. In 1977, after it reemerged from political oblivion, the JI became the principal representative of the modernist tradition in the political domain; there were a few small political parties which represented the fragmented *ulema* community. In 1981, these groups came together and nominated Muhammadullah (commonly known as Hafezzi Huzur) as a candidate in the presidential election. He secured a meagre 1.79% of the popular vote but succeeded in carving out a space for the orthodox Islamists in the political realm. The Ershad regime tried to tap the potential influence of this strand of support and attempted to coopt them to provide his rule with much-needed legitimacy. Snubbed by the JI, Ershad did threaten to go after the party. For example, on November 12, 1988, while addressing a gathering of the erstwhile freedom fighters he said, "Those who opposed the liberation war in 1971 and killed the freedom fighters have now joined politics with their heads high... Will you remain silent? Will you sit idle? It is high time these enemies of liberation are eliminated. They have no place in this country" (Ahmed, 1991, p. 503). However, the JI did not face significant persecution from the Ershad regime.

Although the BAL was increasingly using religious rhetoric and symbols since 1991 to counter the popular perception that the party was hostile to Islam, its endeavor to use religion as a tool of legitimation began in 2013. With the establishment of the ICT in 2010, arrests of the JI leaders in 2011, and their convictions in 2013, the JI faced serious repression. Cancellation of the registration with the EC in 2013 and continued

repression forced the JI to gradually shut down its activities. While the regime adopted repressive measures against the JI, it did not want to be portrayed as "anti-Islamic," which prompted them to allow other Islamist actors to operate. By then, the Islamist political landscape in Bangladesh had dramatically changed as Islamists of various shades had appeared. They can be divided into following categories: pragmatist/opportunists, idealists and orthodox *pir*- (preacher) and *mazar*- (shrine)centric, urban elite-centric, and jihadists (Riaz, 2018, pp. 13–14). The pragmatist/opportunist strand—which can also be described as the modernist camp—was exclusively represented by the JI. With the marginalization of the JI, the broad alliance of the conservative Hefazat emerged and flexed their muscles. In May 2013, when the HI held a sit-in at the downtown of the capital with hundreds of thousands of their supporters from the country and the BNP lent its support, it appeared as a potent threat to the regime. As such, the government changed its strategy, forced the demonstrators out of the square, and filed cases against its leaders. Yet the BAL had also recognized the mobilization capacity of the HI and its potential appeal to a large section of society due to growing religiosity among people—especially because of the HI's demand for protecting the honor of Prophet Muhammad. The BAL was also nervous of the potential adverse fallout of being portrayed as anti-Islamic.

Besides, the political situation was deteriorating as it became evident that without the restoration of a CTG to oversee the election, opposition parties were unlikely to join the election scheduled in 2014. Under such circumstances, the BAL quickly moved to mend its differences with the HI. Through informal negotiations, a reported dispensation of material benefits, the threat of actions based on the cases filed during the May 2013 demonstrations, and making public statements akin to the HI's position, the incumbent succeeded in coopting the HI.

The 2014 election, held without opposition, resulted in a one-party parliament, made the BAL's legitimacy claim weaker and also made it imperative that the incumbent look beyond institutional mechanisms of legitimation. The incumbent governing party, while pursuing other ideational measures (e.g., its own interpretation of the "spirit of independence war" as the benchmark of patriotism and loyalty to the nation), increasingly relied on Islam as a key element of its legitimacy claim. This had contributed to the remarkable growth of Islamist parties since 2014 as they understood that the ruling party would provide more space to them than other parties with ostensibly secularist agendas. A series of policy concessions by the BAL to the HI in 2017, including changes in school textbooks in 2017, support the argument that the more the incumbent faced a crisis of legitimacy, the more it would embrace Islam and Islamists. Such efforts are

not exceptional to Bangladesh. Studies on other countries—for example, Pakistan (Malik, 1986), Morocco and Algeria (Parmentier, 1999), and Indonesia and Malaysia (Freedman, 2009)—have shown that authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes rely on religion for legitimacy. A similar argument has been made by Lorch (2019) about Bangladesh. In 2018, ahead of the election, a staggering 61 Islamist parties were within the fold of the BAL-led alliance. The BNP, previously known to be closer to the Islamists, had only five within their fold. Of the registered ten parties, six were with the BAL, two were with the BNP, and two remained away from any alliances.

In late 2020, as the assertive HI challenged erecting a statue of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, father of Prime Minister Hasina, the government decided to crack down on the leadership. Weakened by the death of the HI leader, Maulana Ahmed Shafi, in September and facing internal squabbles over leadership in November, the HI was soon brought under control by the government. The understanding between the HI and the government broke down when the HI staged a series of demonstrations during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2021 (Abrar, 2021). It is worth noting that the government's actions against the HI and its leadership were not about the ideological position of the organization. As reported in the press in mid-April 2021 quoting ruling party leaders, the government's aim was “to exert its control on Hefazat's leadership” (Hossain, 2021). The government was more concerned about the breakdown of the understanding with the HI than with containing the impact of the HI's ideology. At least 19 leaders of the HI were arrested and hundreds of cases were filed against the leaders and supporters of the HI (Zahid, 2023). After several rounds of changes in the leadership, the HI was tamed and fell in line with the government. By the end of 2022, a delegation of the HI met the prime minister (Bangladesh Live, 2022) and the home minister assured that Prime Minister Hasina will “look into the Hefazat-e-Islam's demands” (The Business Standard, 2022). Besides, ministers and party leaders repeatedly mentioned that the BAL will not do anything contrary to Qur'an or Sunnah (Dhaka Tribune, 2023) and the government has already built 250 ‘model mosques’ around the country and plans to construct 314 more (New Age, 2023). At the time of writing this article, the country is approaching the next election to be held in January 2024. The opposition parties have threatened to boycott the election unless an interim nonpartisan government is appointed to oversee the election and so the ruling party has begun to lean on the Islamist parties to provide a veneer of a participatory election (Bangladesh Post, 2023; Hossain, 2023). These moves by the government make two points evident: the growing authoritarian tendency of the BAL and its reliance on Islam as a part of its legitimation process.

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Once considered as a volatile mix, religion and politics are now intertwined in many parts of the world. The secularization thesis, which posited a clear separation between state and religion, is undergoing serious challenge as many countries have either a state religion or a preferred religion. In a similar vein, the relationship between religion and authoritarianism is no longer viewed as hostile. Authoritarian rulers are increasingly instrumentalizing religion to claim their right to rule. Existing literature has demonstrated that authoritarian rulers use three mechanisms for legitimation: institutional, performance, and ideological. Regarding religion and religious actors, they use repression and cooptation through various institutions, while religion serves as one of the ideological tools. This article examined three eras of authoritarian rule in Bangladesh, 1976–1981, 1982–90, and 2011 to the present. In these three phases, regimes have used Islam as a legitimizing ideology. Both military rulers, Ziaur Rahman (1976–1980) and H.M. Ershad (1982–1990), brought religion to the forefront of national identity through constitutional changes and through formal and informal practices. In Bangladesh, Islamists do not mean a homogenous group of actors; for centuries, two different strands of Islamists have been present in the sociopolitical milieu—modernists who are trained in the Western educational system and conservatives who are trained in Islamic seminaries.

The Zia regime's primary approach in dealing with the Islamists has been cooptation. His decisions opened the political space for the Islamists, including the JI which opposed the independence of Bangladesh. Despite declaring Islam the state religion, the Ershad regime had not been successful in coopting modernist Islamists. Consequently, Ershad tried to coopt the conservative/orthodox Islamists and occasionally threatened to use repression against those Islamists who did not support him. The Hasina regime shows that the more the Bangladeshi government has slid toward authoritarianism since 2011, the more it has relied upon religion as an ideology and adopted repression and cooptation as strategies to deal with Islamist political actors. A crisis of moral legitimacy has prompted these regimes to use religion as one of the key ideologies for their legitimacy claim.

ORCID

Ali Riaz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8462-0642>

REFERENCES

- Abrar, Mahir. 2021. “Opportunism Catching Up with Bangladesh's Awami League.” *East Asia Forum*, June 26. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/26/opportunism-catching-up-with-bangladeshs-awami-league/>.

- Acemoglu, Daron, Thierry Verdier, and James A. Robinson. 2004. "Kleptocracy and Divide-and-Rule: A Model of Personal Rule." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 2(2-3): 162-92. <https://doi.org/10.1162/154247604323067916>.
- Ahmed, Mumtaz. 1991. "Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat." In *Fundamentalisms Observed*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Ahmed, Salahuddin. 2004. *Bangladesh: Past and Present*. Dhaka: APH Publishing.
- Aljazeera. 2021. "Bangladesh Cracks Down on Islamist Group after Anti-Modi Protests." April 19. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/19/bangladesh-cracks-down-on-islamist-group-after-anti-modi-protests>.
- Anisuzzaman. 1993. "Towards a Redefinition of Identity: East Bengal, 1947-1971." In *Creativity, Reality and Identity*, edited by Anisuzzaman. Dhaka: International Center for Bengal Studies.
- Anisuzzaman. 1995. *Identity, Religion and Recent History*. Calcutta: Naya Udyong.
- Auriol, Emmanuelle, and Jean-Philippe Platteau. 2016. "Religious Seduction in Autocracy: A Theory Inspired by History." <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2777545>.
- Bangladesh Live. 2022. "Hefazat Demands Release of Leaders while Meeting Sheikh Hasina." 18 December. <https://www.bangladeshlivenews.com/en/bangladesh/details/hefazat-demands-release-of-leaders-while-meeting-sheikh-hasina>.
- Bangladesh Post. 2023. "Six Islamic Parties Form New Alliance." September 4. <https://bangladeshpost.net/posts/six-islamic-parties-form-new-alliance-120049>.
- Bellin, Eva. 2008. "Faith in Politics. New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics." *World Politics* 60(2): 315-47. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.0.0007>.
- Berger, Peter. 1969. *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Berger, Peter. 1999. "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview." In *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, edited by Peter Berger, 1-18. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): 5-19.
- Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). 2022. 'Country Report: Bangladesh'. Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BGD>.
- Casanova, Jose. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Casanova, Jose. 2001. "Civil Society and Religion: Retrospective Reflections on Catholicism and Prospective Reflections on Islam." *Social Research* 68(4): 1041-80.
- Davenport, Christian. 2007. "State Repression and Political Order." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10(1): 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.143216>.
- Dell'Aguzzo, Loretta, and Ester Sigillò. 2017. "Political Legitimacy and Variations in State-Religion Relations in Tunisia." *The Journal of North African Studies* 22(4): 511-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1340841>.
- de Luca, Giacomo, Petros G. Sekeris, and Juan F. Vargas. 2014. *Beyond Divide and Rule: Weak Dictators, Natural Resources, and Civil Conflict*. University of Portsmouth, mimeo.
- Dhaka Tribune. 2023. "Dipu Moni: Do Not Fall for Propaganda Centring on New Books." *Dhaka Tribune*, February 7. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/304453/dipu-moni-do-not-fall-for-propaganda-centring-on>.
- Diamond, Larry. 2002. "Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes." *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 21-35. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0025>.
- Dukalskis, Alexander, and Johannes Gerschewski. 2017. "What Autocracies Say (and What Citizens Hear): Proposing Four Mechanisms of Autocratic Legitimation." *Contemporary Politics* 23(3): 251-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1304320>.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1912/1995. *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Fox, Jonathon. 2018. *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Fox, Jonathan, and Nukhet A. Sandal. 2013. *Religion in International Relations Theory: Interactions and Possibilities*. London: Routledge.
- Frantz, Erica, and Andrea Kendall-Taylor. 2014. "A Dictator's Toolkit: Understanding How Co-Optation Affects Repression in Autocracies." *Journal of Peace Research* 51(3): 332-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313519808>.
- Freedman, Amy L. 2009. "Political Viability, Contestation and Power: Islam and Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia." *Politics and Religion* 2: 100-27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048309000054>.
- Freedom House. 2023. *Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy*. Washington DC: Freedom House.
- Gandhi, Jennifer. 2008. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gandhi, Jennifer, and Adam Przeworski. 2006. "Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships." *Economics & Politics* 18(1): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0343.2006.00160.x>.
- Geddes, Barbara. 1999. "What Do We Know About Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 115-44.
- Gerschewski, Johannes. 2013. "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes." *Democratization* 20(1): 13-38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860>.
- Hadden, Jeffrey K. 1987. "Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory." *Social Forces* 65(3): 587-611. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2578520>.
- Hakim, Muhammad A. 1998. "The Use of Islam as a Political Legitimation Tool: The Bangladesh Experience, 1972-1990." *Asian Journal of Political Science* 6(2): 98-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185379808434127>.
- Hashmi, Taj Islam. 2004. "Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh: Genesis, Dynamics, and Implications" In *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, edited by S. P. Limaye, M. Malik and R. G. Wirsing, 35-72. Honolulu, Hawaii: Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies.
- Haynes, Jeff. 1991. *Religion in Global Politics*. London: Longman.
- Haynes, Jeff. 1994. *Religion in Third World Politics*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Hossain, Anowar. 2021. "Govt to Take Stern Stance on Hefazat, Aiming to Control Leadership." *The Daily Star*, April 16, 2021. <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/govt-to-take-stern-stance-on-hefazat-aiming-to-control-leadership>.
- Hossain, Anowar. 2023. "Pro-govt Islamist Parties Take Initiative for New Alliance." *Prothom Alo English*, May 11. <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/zrtwbym10d>.
- Jahangir, B. K. 2002. *Nationalism, Fundamentalism and Democracy in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: International Center for Bengal Studies.
- Josua, Maria. 2016. "Co-Optation Reconsidered: Authoritarian Regime Legitimation Strategies in the Jordanian 'Arab Spring'." *Middle East Law and Governance* 8(1): 32-56. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-00801001>.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 1993. *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kabir, Bhuian Md. Monoar. 2006. *Politics and Development of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: A H Development Publishing House.

- Kabir, Humayun. 2012. *Politics of Islam, the State, and the Contested Cultural Identity: Ulama's Activism in Postcolonial Bangladesh*. Alexandria, Egypt: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Futuristic Studies Unit.
- Kailitz, Steffen, and Daniel Stockemer. 2017. "Regime Legitimation, Elite Cohesion and the Durability of Autocratic Regime Types." *International Political Science Review* 38(3): 332–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512115616830>.
- Kettell, Steven. 2013. "State Religion and Freedom: A Comparative Analysis." *Politics and Religion* 6(3): 538–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048312000600>.
- Khatun, Sayema. 2010. "Examining the Discourses of Political Islam in Bangladesh." *Anthropology Journal* 10: 69–82.
- Koesel, Karrie J. 2014. *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Konrad, Kai A., and Vai-Lam Mui. 2015. *The Prince – or Better no Prince? The Strategic Value of Appointing a Successor*. Monash Economics Working Papers 15-15. Monash University, Department of Economics.
- Konrad, Kai A., and Stergios Skaperdas. 2007. "Succession Rules and Leadership Rents." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51(4): 622–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707302799>.
- Laws, Edward. 2016. "Dominant Party Systems and Development Programming." GSDRC K4D Report Number 4. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lifschultz, Lawrence. 1979. *Bangladesh: Unfinished Revolution*. London: Zed Books.
- Linz, Juan. 1964. "An Authoritarian Regime: Spain." In *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems: Contributions to Comparative Political Sociology*, edited by Erik Allardt and Yrjö Littunen, 291–341. Helsinki: The Academic Bookstore.
- Lizzeri, Alessandro, and Nicola Persico. 2004. "Why Did the Elites Extend the Suffrage? Democracy and the Scope of Government, With an Application to Britain's Age of Reform." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 119(2): 707–65. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0033553041382175>.
- Lorch, Jasmin. 2019. "Islamization by Secular Ruling Parties: The Case of Bangladesh." *Politics and Religion* 12(2): 257–82. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048318000573>.
- Magaloni, Beatriz. 2008. "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule." *Comparative Political Studies* 41(4–5): 715–41.
- Mahmud, Faisal. 2021. Bangladesh Seethes with Religious Tension over Founding Father's Statue. *TRT*, December 21. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/bangladesh-seethes-with-religious-tension-over-founding-father-s-statue-42450>.
- Malik, Hafeez. 1986. "Martial Law and Islamization in Pakistan." *Orient* 27(4): 583–605.
- Marx, Karl. 1843/2012. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. n.p.: Create Space Independent Pub.
- Morelli, Massimo, and Dominic Rohner. 2014. "Resource Concentration and Civil Wars." *NBER Working Paper* 20129.
- Morse, Yonatan L. 2012. "The Era of Electoral Authoritarianism." *World Politics* 64(1): 161–98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887111000281>.
- Mostofa, Shafi Md. 2021a. "Jama'at-e-Islami and Trust Building in Bangladesh." *Politics & Policy* 49(3): 708–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12403>.
- Mostofa, Shafi Md. 2021b. *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Pyramid Root Cause Model*. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Mostofa, Shafi Md, and DB Subedi. 2020. "Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism in Bangladesh." *Politics and Religion* 14(3): 431–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000401>.
- New Age. 2023. "PM Hasina Inaugurates 50 More Model Mosques." July 30. <https://www.newagebd.net/article/208151/pm-hasina-inaugurates-50-more-model-mosques>.
- Öztürk, Ahmet Erdi. 2019. "An Alternative Reading of Religion and Authoritarianism: The New Logic between Religion and State in the AKP's New Turkey." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19(1): 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1576370>.
- Parmentier, Mary Jane C. 1999. "Secularisation and Islamisation in Morocco and Algeria." *The Journal of North African Studies* 4(4): 27–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629389908718378>.
- Parvez, Saimum. 2021. "Understanding the Shahbag and Hefajat Movements in Bangladesh: A Critical Discourse Analysis." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57(4): 841–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211038657>.
- Riaz, Ali. 2004. *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Riaz, Ali. 2009. "Interactions of 'Transnational' and 'Local' Islam in Bangladesh." *NBR Project Report*, April. Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research.
- Riaz, Ali. 2014. "A Crisis of Democracy in Bangladesh." *Current History* 113(762): 150–6. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2014.113.762.150>.
- Riaz, Ali. 2016. *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*. London: I B Tauris.
- Riaz, Ali. 2017. *Lived Islam and Islamism in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Prothoma.
- Riaz, Ali. 2018. "More Than Meets the Eye: The Narratives of Secularism and Islam in Bangladesh" *Asian Affairs* 49(2): 301–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1467659>.
- Riaz, Ali. 2019. *Voting in a Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Riaz, Ali. 2021a. "Bangladesh: The Return of Religion to the Political Centerstage." In *Religion and Politics in South Asia*, edited by Ali Riaz. London: Routledge.
- Riaz, Ali. 2021b. "The Pathway of Democratic Backsliding in Bangladesh." *Democratization* 28(1): 179–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1818069>.
- Riaz, Ali. 2022. *Culture of Fear on World Politics: Origin and Ramifications*. Edited by Bikash Ranjan Deb. Kolkata: Levant Books.
- Schedler, Andreas. 2006. *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Schleutker, Elina. 2016. "A Note on the Determinants of the Regulation of Religion." *Politics and Religion* 9(4): 744–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048316000109>.
- Schlumberger, Oliver. 2010. "Opening Old Bottles in Search of New Wine: On Nondemocratic Legitimacy in the Middle East." *Middle East Critique* 19(3): 233–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2010.514473>.
- Snyder, Jack. 2011. *Religion and International Relations Theory*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Stacher, Joshua. 2012. *Adaptable Autocrats. Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- The Business Standard. 2022. PM Will Surely Look into Hefazat-e-Islam's Demands: Home Minister. *The Business Standard*, December 18. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/pm-will-surely-look-hefazat-e-islams-demands-home-minister-553802>.
- V-Dem. 2018. *Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018*. Gothenburg (Sweden): V-Dem Institute.
- von Soest, Christian, and Julia Grauvogel. 2017. "Identity, Procedures and Performance: How Authoritarian Regimes Legitimize Their Rule." *Contemporary Politics* 23(3): 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1304319>.
- Weber, Max. 1905/2002. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: and Other Writings*. London: Penguin.
- Zahid, Selim. 2023. "Hefazat Reintegrating Defunct Committee Leaders 'Under Duress'." *Prothom Alo English*. August 14. <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/ylishq4yde>.

Zaman, Fahmida. 2018. "Agencies of Social Movements: Experiences of Bangladesh's Shahbag Movement and Hefazat-e-Islam" *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 53(3): 339–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909616666870>.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ali Riaz (PhD) is a Distinguished Professor of political science at Illinois State University, United States, and a Nonresident Senior Fellow of the Atlantic Council. He served as a Visiting Researcher at the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) in Sweden (2023) and a Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC (2013). His areas of interests are South Asian politics, democratization, violent

extremism, political Islam, and Bangladeshi politics. His recent publications include "Trials and Tribulations: Politics, Economy and Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh" (2023); "More than Meets the Eye" (2022), "Religion and Politics in South Asia" (2021), "Voting in a Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election" (2019) and *Nikhoj Gonotontro* (in Bengali, 2021).

How to cite this article: Riaz, Ali. 2024. "Religion as a Tool for Authoritarian Legitimation: The Case of Bangladesh." *World Affairs* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.12016>.