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To cite this article: Ali Riaz (2018): MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: THE NARRATIVES OF SECULARISM AND ISLAM IN BANGLADESH, Asian Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/03068374.2018.1467659](https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1467659)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1467659>



Published online: 08 Jun 2018.



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# MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: THE NARRATIVES OF SECULARISM AND ISLAM IN BANGLADESH

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## Introduction

There is a popular perception that Bangladesh has become the latest battleground between secularism and Islam.<sup>1</sup> This portrayal of the country is reproduced by the international media and emphasized in the public discourse. The rise of a popular movement in 2013 demanding capital punishment for those who committed war crimes in 1971, a series of killings of liberal activists, foreigners and bloggers, the resuscitation of a conservative Islamist alliance demanding anti-blasphemy laws, the spectacular attacks of transnational terrorist groups such as Da'esh (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) and AQIS (Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) between 2013 and 2016, and the ruling party's expedient moves to placate conservative Islamist groups provide the background for such a portrayal. The common thread of this portrayal is that the country is in search of its 'secular soul',<sup>2</sup> that 'secularism' has eroded and/or is eroding, and that Islam is on the rise in the country.

However, there are problems with this mode of discussion. It overlooks the historical background of the interactions between religion and politics. It subscribes to a skewed narrative of history, particularly since the founding of the country in 1971. More than this, it ignores the multiplicity of both Islamic practices and the understanding of secularism. What these discussions describe as 'secular' and 'religious' are seldom backed by any examination of lived experience: its diversity and contradictions, and its tendency to homogenize everything. Such discussions

fail to consider that the debate among the secularists about an ideal disposition of a secular identity has remained incomplete, and also that the notion of ‘Muslim’ identity is fraught with schisms.

This article intends to call into question this simplified understanding and the false dichotomy of religion and secularism in Bangladesh. The discussion is prefaced with my understanding of Islam, secularism and secularization.

## **Islam, secularism and secularization**

There have been two distinct strands of understanding as to what Islam means:

one sees Islam as the unfolding of a common uniform pattern that as a world religion it is supposed to signify and represent. The other sees Islam as evolving in response to local demands within each Islamic country or population.<sup>3</sup>

The challenges to and debates on defining Islam are not exclusively related to Islam, but are essentially a rephrasing of the question, what do we mean by a religion? Is a religion a set of articles of faith and rituals independent of its adherents’ agency and/or is religion an institutionalized bargain, a power contract between the individual and the society? This difference, in the context of Islam, has been described as a difference between ‘dogma’ and the culturally informed experience of adherents.<sup>4</sup>

According to Hamid Dabashi,

we need to make a distinction between “Islam” in its doctrinal foundations in the Qur’an and Hadith literature and its juridical character in Islamic law (Shari’ah), on the one hand, and “Islam” as a lived experience that covers a vast range of symbolic, discursive and institutional domains, on the other.<sup>5</sup>

My own view is that a religion cannot be understood without comprehending the lives and practices of its adherents, and without comprehending its temporal context – the history, the society and the political structure within which it is placed. Religion cannot be analysed as if it is a “transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon”. Instead, religion should be viewed as a “historical product of discursive processes”.<sup>6</sup>

Secularism has become a highly debated concept among social scientists in recent decades. The dominant interpretation has three dimensions. Philosophically, secularism can be described as rejection of the

transcendental and metaphysical in favour of the existential and empirical; sociologically, the term entails the gradual decline of religion's influence on public life and social institutions; and politically, it is seen as the separation between private and public spheres, represented by the separation of state and religion. These are not mutually exclusive.

In recent articulations, there have been serious concerns regarding the flaws of the conceptual and normative structure of secularism. Secularism is not a neutral category; instead, notions of 'secular' have been shaped through European history, representing specific structures of power; thus, authoritatively describing certain modes of living as 'acceptable', while prohibiting others.<sup>7</sup> William Connolly points to the anti-pluralist assumption of secularism. He asserts that secularism should be inclusive to "pursue an ethos of engagement in public life among a plurality of controversial metaphysical perspectives ... secular thought and a secular, nontheistic perspective".<sup>8</sup> Yet, in common parlance, 'secularism' seems to be understood as an immutable concept and statecraft; and the extant discourse often ignores the fact that "secularism is an historically shifting category with a variegated genealogy".<sup>9</sup> What Jurgen Habermas has described as "narrow secularist consciousness"<sup>10</sup> is the dominant characteristic of the prevailing discussions, particularly in Bangladesh.

While secularism refers to the doctrine or policy that insists on separation between state and religion, secularization refers to the process which creates a distinction between private and public spheres and relegates religion to the private sphere. It also reflects the gradual decline of religion's influence in society. Peter Berger defined secularization as the "shrinkage in the role of religion, both in social life and individual consciousness".<sup>11</sup> Jose Casanova argued that secularization means three processes; they are: (1) "the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies", (2) "the privatization of religion" and (3) "the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science)".<sup>12</sup> It is only when the differentiations were accepted by religions and society in Europe, following the Wars of Religion, that secularism as a state principle emerged.

## **Narratives of secularism in Bangladesh**

The dominant narrative of the rise and fall of secularism in Bangladesh has two parts to it. The protagonists of this narrative argue that "secularism is the inherent spirit of Bengali nationalism"<sup>13</sup> which spearheaded the founding of Bangladesh in 1971.<sup>14</sup> Making it a part of the wider debate

about national identity, scholars of this strand argue that Bengali ethnic nationalism is inherently opposed to religious identification. This line of argument frames the discussion between two opposing poles of ethnic identity versus religion. This binary framing of the debate conceals the complexity of national identity formation and identity politics. In some variations of this argument, the proponents point to the syncretic tradition of Islam in Bengal, suggesting that Bengali ethnic identity has already incorporated within itself the local version of Islam. It states that the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971 is a rejection of the Muslim identity which served as the founding principle of the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. The argument further insists that the institutional arrangement regarding religion and politics was settled in favour of the banishment of religion from the public sphere through the inclusion of secularism as a state principle in the constitution in 1972.

The narrative then focuses on the juridico-legal measures, particularly the constitutional amendments, passed by parliaments over the past 46 years to show how the secular state and secularist ideology faced a later decline. Taking the 1972 constitution as the point of departure, protagonists claim that it established a 'secular state'. The argument states that the replacement of secularism as a state principle with "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah" by the military regime of Ziaur Rahman in 1977 (incorporated in the Constitution through the Fifth Amendment in 1979) and allowing religion-based political parties to participate in politics was the turning point. Ziaur Rahman's successor, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who usurped state power in 1982 through another coup, declared Islam the state religion in 1988 in his bid to gain political legitimacy. Thus, the secular Bangladeshi state faced demise. However, according to this stance, the tide turned in June 2011 with the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment of the constitution, which brought secularism back to the constitution. The ruling Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) amended the constitution, after the Supreme Court annulled a number of previous constitutional amendments including the Fifth Amendment, which legitimated the removal of secularism from the constitution, and the Eighth Amendment, which accorded Islam the status of state religion. The Fifteenth Amendment of the constitution, which reinstated secularism as a state principle, also retained Islam as the state religion. In March 2016, the High Court rejected a petition on technical grounds (filed in 1988) challenging the status of Islam as the state religion. Beyond the juridical measures, proponents of this narrative argue that Islamist parties gained strength post-1975, due to state patronage and the support of one of the major political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

This argument that Bangladesh witnessed a top-down Islamization with the support of the state following the downfall of the Bangladesh Awami League in 1975 has been challenged by some scholars. They argue that secularism as a state principle was incongruent with the ethos of the citizens of Bangladesh. As such, they maintain that the resurgence of religion is simultaneously a backlash against secularist politics and a return to the broader historical trajectory.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, both sides have selectively used the history of the region which makes up modern-day Bangladesh to support their interpretations. For example, the ‘backlash’ thesis ignores the fact that Islam in Bengal has always been ready to adapt itself to various local elements. One of the defining features of the expansion and consolidation of Islam is this adaptability to Hindu and other local religious traditions.<sup>16</sup> By allowing shared customs, traditions and practices to be part of a universal faith, its adherents have learned that there is no such thing as a monolithic Islam. Richard Eaton observes that,

It would be wrong ... to view Islam as some monolithic agency that simply “expanded” across space, time and social class, in the process assimilating great numbers of people into a single framework of piety. Rather, the religion was itself continuously reinterpreted as different social classes in different periods became its dominant carriers.<sup>17</sup>

Eaton states, “what made Islam in Bengal not only historically successful but a continuing vital social reality has been its capacity to adapt to the land and the culture of its people, even while transforming both”.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, since the beginning of the expansion of Islam in Bengal, variations in interpretations of religion and rituals have become embedded into the ethos of its adherents; this remains the mainstay of Islam in Bangladesh.

In a similar vein, those who argue that Bengali ethnic identity has emerged in distinction to religious identity make an a priori judgement that Bengaliness and Muslimness are two distinctly different and irreconcilable categories.

In Bengal the phenomenon described as ‘Muslim consciousness’, or in other words ‘Muslim identity’, began as a manifestation of a contradiction within a rural population in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rafiuddin Ahmed, for example, suggests, “Despite the cultural ambivalence that has characterized Bengal Muslim history since the medieval period, a self-conscious community defining itself primarily as Muslim did

emerge over time by the early twentieth century”.<sup>19</sup> The roots of this manifestation can be traced back to the emergence of a landed class, thanks to the Permanent Settlement of 1793, who later became the fountainhead of the Kolkata-based urban English-educated middle class. As they were predominantly Hindus, Muslim peasants of East Bengal remained alienated and marginalized. Concurrently two Muslim revivalist movements, the Faraizi movement (c.1830–c.1857) and Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah (c.1820–c.1840), emerged and became popular in various parts of East Bengal. The Faraizi movement, which “spread with extraordinary rapidity in the rice swamp districts of eastern Bengal”,<sup>20</sup> became popular among the Muslim peasants with messages of Muslim solidarity on the one hand and anti-British nationalism on the other. More indigenous than the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah, the Faraizi movement propagated a message that provided a sense of Muslim identity which had until then been absent among the poorest segments of the Muslim peasants. The pan-Islamic transnational identity, which was at the heart of the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah’s campaign, also resonated because of its distinctiveness from the Hindus in rural Bengal. These movements, often violent, had combined personal religiosity, class consciousness and anti-colonial sentiment, and demonstrated that rural poor Muslims can act as a community. Within both the political and social realms, Muslim identity became the principal marker of difference and religion as a means of mobilization.

In the decades prior to the partition of 1947, a vigorous debate on issues pertaining to community identity took place as the Muslim middle class began organizing literary and social organizations and publishing journals and periodicals. *Anjumans* began to appear in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Syed Ameer Ali established the Central National Mohamadan Association in 1877, and Bangiya Sahitya Bishayayani Mussalman Sabha came into existence in 1899. The number of such organizations proliferated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> Although the issue of language was at the centre of these debates, they vigorously addressed the identity issue. For example, the *Muslim Shahitya Samaj*, established in Dhaka in 1926, and its mouthpiece, *Shikha*, argued for a rationalist Muslim identity rooted in the Bengali cultural tradition. Works of the literati associated with the organization demonstrated that Muslim and Bengali identities were not mutually exclusive. Therefore, the argument that in the 1940s, particularly in 1947, Bengalis of the eastern part of undivided Bengal rejected their Bengali identity and subscribed to a pan-Indian Islamic identity is erroneous. The explanation of their support for the Pakistan movement as an act of ‘Muslim unity in India’ at the expense of regional distinctiveness is far from the truth.

Has that changed after 1947, particularly with the Language Movement in the 1950s?<sup>22</sup> The official narrative suggests that the language movement was the first indication of the emerging secular ethnic national identity among the Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis. But as Ahmed Kamal has pointed out:

Islam was so important in the day to day politics that even secular demands were tinged by religious nationalism. The nascent Bengali linguistic nationalism of the 1950s also drew many of its metaphors and concepts from the idioms and institution of Islam.<sup>23</sup>

Tazeen Murshid's analysis further strengthens the argument: "The language movement was an act of two-fold self-assertion – cultural and political – in an essentially political power struggle. It implied no self-conscious denial of Islam".<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the growing appeal of Bengali identity, from its inception, was not a disavowal of religious identity.

This is not to suggest that there weren't any efforts to distance religion from culture and politics. There was a trend, somewhat akin to the intellectual tradition of the 1920s literary journal *Shikha*, which was "deeply influenced by humanist thought, and which envisaged a liberal democratic society where culture belonged to the secular arena".<sup>25</sup> In the 1960s, as the Pakistani state politicized Islam and advanced it as the *raison d'être* of a repressive state, we can identify two trends which emerged in opposition to this political project. First, a trend which underscored the "eclectic local cultural roots"<sup>26</sup> – a tradition which blended the Islamic ethos of egalitarianism with politics; second, a trend within which personal religiosity, public displays of faith and adherence to religious culture in social life were viewed as a separate domain from politics, which, in this view, should be determined by other material concerns. The latter was largely a product of the urban, educated, emerging middle class: they neither identified with the politicized Islam advanced by the Pakistani state nor were connected to the rural eclectic Islam. Whether the disjuncture between the cultural ethos and the worldview of the rural population and the nascent middle class can be described as secular ideology is open to interpretation. Therefore, the argument that the salience of ethnic identity was an affirmation of secularity and/or rejection of religious identity is highly problematic.

The juridico-legal description of the relationship between religion and politics in post-independence Bangladesh has serious weaknesses. Despite declaring secularism as a state principle and limiting the role of religion in politics, a latent tension between the idea of secularism and the role of Islam in society remained within the Bangladeshi



society. The Bangladeshi state in its early days failed to address this tension. The declaration of secularism as a state principle, in theory, consigned religion to the private realm, and therefore did away with the mix of religion and politics. But there was very little, if any, discussion about secularism and the secularization processes. Additionally, the state and the ruling party repeatedly highlighted Muslim identity, and allowed the state machineries, including the state-controlled media, to engage in religious activities. For example, they adopted a policy of equal opportunity for all religions and read extracts from the holy books of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity daily at the beginning of the transmission. The meaning of ‘secularism’ remained vague to both the ruling elites and the common masses. The absence of a clear understanding of secularism contributed to maintaining, and perhaps intensifying, this tension.

After 1975, Bangladesh’s military rulers seized upon this tension and brought Islam into the political arena to gain political legitimacy. They used Islam as a political ideology, and led the state to propagate a particular interpretation of Islam. Thereafter, political expediency dictated the use of religious rhetoric in politics by all parties irrespective of their claims to be secularists; they befriended Islamist parties for electoral gains and street agitation. The grand narrative of national history constructed by the secular nationalist elites not only declines to recognize the internal tensions and misunderstanding surrounding secularism but also claims that the elite-constructed and dominated version of ‘secularism’ represents the aspiration of the masses.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the political arena, the socio-religious institutions remained intact. An essential point of the secularization process is to define the roles of these institutions vis-à-vis the state. It is an understatement to say that secularizing is a ‘political project’ which has never been initiated in Bangladesh because there hasn’t been any bona fide secular ‘political force’ to pursue the project. The question as to what it means to secularize a deeply religious society like Bangladesh has never been discussed. Secularism, as a state principle and as a statecraft, arrived before the process of secularization was ever conceived. Secularism as a state principle was imposed from above without any debates and discussion within the society. The inverted relationship between secularism and secularization is not unique to Bangladesh; it is very common to non-Western societies where the concept of a nation-state has been imported (or built after the European model). Examples abound, but it is sufficient to mention Sri Lanka, Thailand and Egypt in this regard. In the event

of the emergence of state-sponsored secularism, the state often fails to reduce the overall influence of religion because of the absence of secularization; in fact, religious influence is *displaced* onto civil society, where it remains as a latent force fully capable of resurfacing and entering the state domain.<sup>28</sup> This makes it a battle between the state and society. It is in this regard we must recall that neither the deletion of secularism in 1977 by a military ruler nor its reinstatement in 2011 by a civilian government was a result of public dialogues, but of the political expediency of the elites.

The politics of expediency has been limited neither to one party nor to a specific phase of Bangladeshi history. In recent years the prime minister's assertion that the country will be run by Medina Charter,<sup>29</sup> repeated warnings to bloggers from officials including the prime minister to stay within the limits approved by the state with regard to criticisms of Islam,<sup>30</sup> and the government's decision to remove a statue from the Supreme Court premises<sup>31</sup> are clear indications of pacification of the conservative Islamists demands.

## Polyvocal Islam in Bangladesh

Islamist ideologues, in Bangladesh as elsewhere, attempt to portray Islam as a homogenized idea, its adherents as a monolithic community and Islamic society as a utopian pristine entity. This can't be further from the truth. A 'true', universal notion of Islam remains limited only to the fundamental articles of faith. The remainder of the religion is shaped and reshaped by its adherents based on multiple factors. As Dabashi noted: "*Polyfocal* has always been the discursive disposition of Islam, just as the languages and cultures through which it has spoken are *polyvocal*, and the geographical domains and domesticities of its historical manifestations are *polylocal*".<sup>32</sup> This is equally true within a Muslim community and within a country.

There are various meanings of Islam and its role in individuals' lives in contemporaneous Bangladesh. In other words, as a lived experience Islam has various manifestations, and individual practice of Muslim rituals varies enormously. Artefacts of traditional popular culture – for example, folk songs – emphasize the mystic tradition within Islam, veneration of *pirs* (saints) and *mazars* (shrines) are common practices which draw on local tradition<sup>33</sup> and the *ulema* in Bangladesh are adherents of various *madhabs* and *maslaks* (ways or creed).

Lived Islam in Bangladesh can be broadly divided into two categories: social Islam and political Islam (see [Table 1](#)). I admit that this

Table 1 Variations of Islam in Bangladesh

Social Islam						
Baul tradition	Sufi tradition	<i>Pirs and Mazars</i>	Tabligh Jamaat	Traditional institutions and practices	'Religiosity'	Islamic organizations/ schools of thought
Lalon Fakir	Mujaddadiya; Chistiya; Nakshbandia; Quaderia	<b><i>Pirs</i></b> Furfura; Jainpuri; Sharshina; Chor Monai; Atrash;; Enayetpuri; Fultali  <b><i>Mazars</i></b> Bayazid Bostami; Shah Jalal; Khan Jahan Ali; Shah Makhdum; Shah Amanot; Maijbhandari	<i>Dawa</i> ; annual congregation; apolitical gatherings	<i>Fatwa</i> (edict); <i>Madrassah</i> (religious seminary). <i>Urs</i> <sup>a</sup> (also spelled as Orosh (anniversary celebration of the saints' death)	Celebration of Eid; restraints during Ramadan; paying alms ( <i>zakat</i> and <i>fitr</i> ); use of Islamic greetings; fearful of religious sanctions, but not devout followers of religious percepts in daily lives.	Adherence to <i>Ahle Sunnat wal Jaamat Ahmadia Muslim Jaamat</i>

Political Islam

Mainstream Islamists	Radical	Militant
<p>Islam as a political ideology; adhere to particular interpretation of Islam; <i>shari'a</i> or a variant of <i>shari'a</i> is preferred; accommodative; participants in (secular) constitutional politics; create bases with political goals in mind.</p>	<p>Islam as a political ideology; subscribe to strict political interpretation of Islam; plan to implement <i>shari'a</i>; no desire to participate in (secular) constitutional politics; maintain close relationship with external entities; ideologically support militancy as a mode of opposition – if and when necessary.</p>	<p>Islam as political ideology and ‘a way of life’; orthodox interpretation of Islam; despise the ‘secular’ nature of the constitution and the social life; maintain external connections; view militancy as the only legitimate means of establishing an Islamic order.</p>

<sup>3</sup>Urs usually takes place at the dargah (shrine or tomb) of a *pir* or saint and the rituals are spread over a few days. These include *dhikr* (remembrance of the name of Allah) and *milad mahfill*, in which adherents praise the Prophet and the saint. Often, they also perform a session of spiritual music, which is known as *qawali*, a special form of Sufi music.

categorization is simplistic and is not equipped to deal with the rich diversity of Bangladeshi society (and many other societies).

The traditional and daily practices, social institutions which occasionally draw on interpretations of Islam, and the religious mindset of the common people comprise social Islam. The defining characteristics of this category are that its practitioners are not guided by scripturalist interpretations of Islam (i.e. literal interpretations of the Qur'an and hadiths), are inclusive of various opinions, practise Islam without any rigidity and underscore individual piety.

Political Islam, on the other hand, is guided by the political objectives of Islamist organizations. For these organizations, Islam is a political ideology, and there is only one acceptable, 'true' interpretation of Islam. These organizations insist that, for individual Muslims, working toward societal change is a sacred responsibility, no less important than their personal salvation.

Social Islam is produced and reproduced by individuals, groups and social institutions through their daily lives. There is no hierarchy in the forms of social Islam, therefore there are no big and little traditions within social Islam; nor should they be seen in this frame vis-à-vis political Islam. The elements and expressions of everyday religion can be simultaneously visible and invisible: visible in the sense that they are performed not only in the private spheres but also within the public sphere and under the gaze of the public and the state; they are also invisible because these are not the only things the adherents do; their lives are not 'all about Islam'.

In [Table 1](#), I have referred to several of these practices. Some are more spiritual than others; some, on the other hand, are limited to simple cultural practices which I have included in the category of 'religiosity'. Take, for example, the Baul tradition in Bangladesh. The spiritual dimension is at the centre of this tradition. In a similar vein, we can mention the Sufi tradition and some of the *mazars* which focus more on spirituality than rituals. However, occasionally, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between Sufis and *mazars*. The Maijbhandari of Chittagong is a case in point – it is simultaneously a *mazar* and a part of the Sufi tradition.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding the similarities within those who advance Islamist ideology and are included in the political Islam category, there are at least three broad subgroups depending on the organizations' political and

Table 2 Taxonomy of Islamist political parties in Bangladesh

Distinguishable traits	Support base	Name(s) of the organization(s)
<p><b>Pragmatist/opportunist</b>            Want to establish Islamic order in society through the state; participate in elections; believe in 'Islamic revolution'; committed to implementation of <i>shari'a</i> and primacy of political goals; propagate politicized interpretation of Islam.</p>	<p>Support within various strata of society; organizational structures are geographically spread around the country; growing support within educated middle class with very active front organizations for students, youth and women; have socio-cultural organizations.</p>	<p>Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (JI)</p>
<p><b>Idealist and orthodox</b>            Want a 'pure' <i>shari'a</i>-based Islamic state; view Islam as primarily 'a way of life'; despise the 'secular' nature of the constitution and social life; view militancy as a justifiable means to capture state power.</p>	<p>Closely tied to qwami madrassahs as leaders of the organizations come from qwami madrassahs, support base is largely within qwami madrassahs and in rural areas; each organization has small pockets of support base in various parts of the country; support bases and organizations are weak.</p>	<p>Jamaat-i-Ulema-e-Islam, Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon (Bangladesh Khilafat Movement), Bangladesh Khilafat Majlish, Nizam-e-Islam.             Hefazat-i-Islam.             Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB)            Zaker Party, Bangladesh Islami Andolon,            Bangladesh Tariqat Federation</p>
<p><b>Pir (preacher of Islam) centric and mazar (shrine) based</b>            Aim to establish a state based on traditional Islam and <i>shari'a</i>; critical of the JI.</p>	<p>Support is spread throughout the country as followers of the <i>pir</i> or <i>mazar</i>; lack organizational structure; party is organized around individuals.</p>	<p>Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh</p>
<p><b>Urban elite-centric</b>            Emphasize ideological struggle against the secular polity and system; want to establish Khilafat; internationally connected; underscores the global struggle.</p>	<p>Highly educated middle class leadership, young educated support base, particularly among higher learning institutions (e.g. university); proficient in usage of technology to spread the message.</p>	<p>Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh</p>

(Continued)

Table 2 Continued

Distinguishable traits	Support base	Name(s) of the organization(s)
<p><b>‘Jihadists’</b>  Militant Islamists who aim to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh through ‘jihad’; increasingly becoming tied to transnational groups.</p>	<p>Support-base is small; sparsely spread around the country; two kinds of leadership have emerged – one from rural, poorer segments of society, the other highly educated, from middle- and upper-middle-class strata and tech-savvy.</p>	<p>Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJIB), Ansar-al Islam, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Shahadat-e-AI Hikma, Islamic State</p>

Note: The registration of the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami with the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) was cancelled in August 2013 following a court verdict that its party constitution conflicts with the constitution of Bangladesh. The case was filed in 2009 by another Islamist group, Bangladesh Tariqat Federation. The BJI has appealed against the verdict but the likelihood of reversing the decision is very slim.

Source: Revised and updated version of Table 3.1, Ali Riaz and Kh. Ali Ar Raji, ‘Who Are the Islamists?’ in Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair (Eds.), *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*. London: Routledge, 2010, p. 48.

organizational strategies. These three groups share the common goal of establishing a state which adheres to Islamic principles even though they have differences on the ideal disposition of an Islamic state. They agree that pluralist ‘Western liberal democracy’ cannot provide a solution to the ‘moral crisis’ of the nation and its citizens. I have identified them as mainstream Islamists, radical Islamists and militant Islamists.

Further exploration of the landscape of Islamist politics, particularly the pronounced goals and objectives and the support bases of the extant organizations, shows that there are at least five kinds of Islamist parties currently operating within Bangladesh (Table 2). Of these Islamist parties, those which fall within the first four categories operate within mainstream politics, while those in the fifth category are clandestine and some have been proscribed since 2005.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion shows that the extant popular perception regarding the relationship between religion and politics in Bangladesh has more than meets the eye. Portraying the current political events and ongoing crisis as a battle between Islam and secularism is not only unhelpful but also counterproductive. The complex historical and contemporaneous developments require a far more nuanced understanding than treating them as simple opposites, and relying on a facile description of the situation. That is a challenging task, but it cannot be suspended for ever.

## NOTES

1. For example, Matt Vasilogambros, ‘The Bloody Fight Over Bangladesh’s Secularism’. *The Atlantic*, April 26, 2016; [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/bangladesh-secularism/479820/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/bangladesh-secularism/479820/); Azim Zahir, ‘Bangladesh Killings Bring Tensions Between Islam and Secularism to the Fore’. *Asian Currents*, May 7, 2016, <http://asaa.asn.au/bangladesh-killings-bring-tensions-between-islam-and-secularism-to-the-fore/>; Anis Ahmed, ‘Bangladesh’s Creeping Islamism’. *New York Times*, February 3, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/opinion/bangladeshs-creeping-islamism.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/opinion/bangladeshs-creeping-islamism.html).
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33. While there are *pirs* who have appeared only in the last century, there are *mazars* which have existed for centuries. The widespread appeal of *pirs* and *mazars* extends beyond the Muslim community. In Table 1 I have cited four shrines: the shrines of Bayazid Bostami located in Chittagong; Shah Jalal in Sylhet; Khan Jahan Ali located in Khulna; and Maijbhandari of Chittagong. By no means is this list exhaustive, but it is indicative of a tradition in Bengal and, later, Bangladesh which is still vibrant and appealing to a large mass of people.
34. Hans Harder, *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh: The Maijbhandaris of Chittagong*. London: Routledge, 2011; see also Sarwar Alam, 'Sufism Without Boundaries: Pluralism, Coexistence, and Interfaith Dialogue in Bangladesh'. *Comparative Islamic Studies* Vol. 9. Issue 1 (2013): 67–90.
35. Seven militant organizations were proscribed between 2003 and May 2017. They are: Shahadat-e-al Hikma on 9 February 2003, Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) on 23 February 2005, Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (HUJI) on 17 October 2005, Hizb ut-Tahrir on 22 October 2009, Ansarullah Bangla Team on 25 May 2015, and Ansar al Islam on 1 March 2017.