

This article was downloaded by: [Illinois State University Milner Library], [Ali Riaz]
On: 01 July 2013, At: 09:35
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered
office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpar20>

The new Islamist public sphere in Bangladesh

Ali Riaz ^a

^a Department of Politics and Government , Illinois State
University , US

Published online: 28 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Ali Riaz (2013): The new Islamist public sphere in Bangladesh, Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change, DOI:10.1080/14781158.2013.806453

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2013.806453>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The new Islamist public sphere in Bangladesh

Ali Riaz*

Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University, US

Historically, Bangladesh has a strong and culturally embedded vibrant public sphere. The Bangladeshi public sphere always consists of a multiplicity of publics. The idea of public sphere in Bangladesh was based on the idea of secular rationality or religious neutrality. However, the situation is changing; attempts are being made to create an Islamist public sphere. This paper highlights two examples of this effort to foster the Islamization of the public sphere: production of Islamist fiction and founding women's discussion groups. It argues that the emerging Islamist public sphere in Bangladesh only subscribes to one interpretation of Islam and that the traditional authorities are now being replaced by the Islamist interpretation advanced by ideologues. It further argues that the absence of reference to local syncretistic traditions in the new Islamist discourse makes its authenticity suspect.

Keywords: public sphere; Islamization; Bangladesh; study group; women

Introduction

Historically, Bangladesh has a strong, vibrant, and culturally embedded public sphere. In other words, a vibrant, discursive arena of rational and critical exchange is not an alien idea in Bangladeshi public life. In fact, the Bangladeshi public sphere has always consisted of a multiplicity of publics. There have been competing, albeit unequal voices in the discursive arena. In some measure, the idea of the public sphere in Bangladesh was based on secular rationality or religious neutrality.¹ These voices, until recently, did not intend to insert religious content into debates and discussions.

However, the situation is changing. Both as a result of the growing strength of Islamist politics within the country² and as a trend currently witnessed globally, attempts are being made to create an Islamist public sphere. What I mean by Islamist public sphere is a space for debates informed by Islamic texts and interpretations, to foreground Islam in daily lives, and create counterpublics.

In this paper I highlight two examples of this effort contributing to the Islamization of the public sphere: production of Islamist fiction and founding women's discussion groups. These, along with other efforts, have foregrounded Islam in contemporary Bangladeshi society as much as they benefit from the heightened visibility of Islam in social and political life. This paper begins with a discussion on the concepts of public sphere and counterpublics to clarify their use in this paper, followed by the two examples and some concluding remarks.

*Email: ariaz@IllinoisState.edu

- 1 Simply speaking, Habermas in his formulation of public sphere insisted on this as a defining feature. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, German 1962, English Translation 1989).
- 2 For details of the growing strengths of Islamist political parties in Bangladesh politics see Ali Riaz, 'The Politics of Islamization in Bangladesh', in *Religion and Politics in South Asia*, ed. Ali Riaz (London: Routledge, 2010), 45–70.

Public sphere and counterpublics

Cognizant of the debate on the contentious nature of the term, in this paper I use 'public sphere' in its broadest sense: a zone of autonomous social activity between family and the ruling authorities. I recognize the limits of the notion of public sphere advocated by Jurgen Habermas, who is credited with bringing the issue to the fore, and apply his ideas selectively in formulating my understanding of public sphere.³ My usage of the term is close to both Miriam Hoexter⁴ and Roger Chartier. Chartier has described the public sphere as 'a space for discussion and exchange removed from the sway of the state'.⁵ Despite such an expansive definition, we cannot completely escape the demand for further explication of the term used in this paper. The criticisms levied against Habermas' conceptualization of public sphere and the historical context within which he formulated his arguments (i.e. Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) include some in-built exclusionary elements. Groups such as women, religious minorities, or those without property were excluded from public sphere (at the time under consideration by Habermas) and thus could not be part of a discussion on the common good.⁶ This problem called for, in Nancy Fraser's words, a 'critical interrogation and reconstruction' of the concept which we have witnessed in the past decade and partly addressed by acknowledging the presence of the multiplicity of public spheres.⁷ It is well to bear in mind that in any formulation of public sphere, that is understanding the public sphere at any time and in any culture, the relations between culture and power remain central. Because in the 'public sphere' various social groups and movements not only interact with each other but also negotiate, conflict and contest the meaning of common good, I emphasize that it is largely about the 'meaning' rather than the goods *per se*. Who determines the meaning in the first place is an important aspect. This is what Eisenstadt described as 'framing' or categorization,⁸ and if I may evoke Michel Foucault here we can easily be reminded that in any discursive encounters norms are already operative which implicate relations of power.⁹ The particular nature of the struggle varies according to a host of factors including time, space, geography and societal norms, to name but a few.

I am also of the opinion that the public sphere is not a depoliticized discursive space, nor can it be entirely separated from political activism; instead the public sphere is

3 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas' book has two major themes: an analysis of the historical genesis of the 'bourgeois public sphere', and a critical description of the structural change of the public sphere in the contemporary era, particularly with the rise of state capitalism, the culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in public life.

4 Miriam Hoexter, 'The Waqf and the Public Sphere', in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 119.

5 Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. L.G. Cochrane (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 17.

6 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 183; Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, nos. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

7 In addition to the oft-quoted essay of Nancy Fraser, see Seyla Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy', in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 67–94, and Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). Taylor, however, proposes a model of 'nested public spheres' in which smaller public spheres nested within larger ones feed into the agenda of a national public sphere. Habermas also acknowledged the exclusionary aspect of his original conceptualization (Jurgen Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', in *Critical Theory and Society. A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 136–42, and Jurgen Habermas, 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 421–61).

8 Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, 'Concluding Remarks: Public Sphere, Civil Society, and Political Dynamics in Islamic Societies', in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 140.

9 Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 78–108.

an important and an indispensable arena for the reproduction of 'life world' political actions on the ground. It is a social space needed by a wide range of actors affiliated with political and cultural orientations in the community to present their views, debate rival perspectives; and justify their actions.¹⁰

The relationship between public sphere and politics is, therefore, closer than one usually envisages. As the public sphere essentially 'defines a discourse beyond face-to-face interaction', delineates the 'criteria of inclusion and exclusion', and 'the recognition of the "other"',¹¹ it is a part of the political in the larger sense of the term.

Discussion of the public sphere cannot be completed without addressing the issue of counterpublics. The essential point of the counterpublics is that it creates parallel discursive arenas; parallel yet connected to each other:

Counterpublics emerge as a kind of public within a public sphere conceived as a multiplicity. They illuminate the differential power relations among diverse publics of a multiple public sphere. Counterpublics signal that some publics develop not simply as one among a constellation of discursive entities, but as explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants.¹²

The counterpublics have two roles: first to serve as sites of debate, identity-formation, and refuge from the public sphere; second to serve as sites of training and resistance for activism in the broader public sphere.¹³

The concept of counterpublics, as envisaged by the Islamists, not only involves invention and circulation of discourses in opposition to those featured in the mainstream but, as Hirschkind has insisted, creation of a moral space crafted through training religious sensibilities and affects.¹⁴ It is important to revisit the history of Islamic societies to understand how the public sphere has played out. Two features can be easily discerned; first, that despite variations in specificities, 'the overall pattern of public sphere (or spheres) ... was rooted in the basic premises and conceptions of Islam';¹⁵ second, that

the public sphere crystallized out of the interaction of 'ulama' (the interpreters of the religious sacred law), the sharia (the religious law), various sectors of the broader community, and the rulers. The basic framework within which such interaction took place was that of sharia, which was the main overall framework of Islamic societies, the regulator of the moral and religious vision, the cohesive and boundary-setting force of Muslim communities.¹⁶

What can be derived from the historical experience is that Islamic societies did have vibrant public spheres, unlike many have argued, but the public spheres have been closely tied to the religious ethos and limited by religious boundaries.

In the case of Bangladesh, however, we are witnessing the emergence of a new public sphere. I also contend that this 'new' and still 'emerging' public sphere is not predetermined; on the contrary, it results from conscious efforts.

The process of establishing a new public sphere is not an easy task, it never has been. Its realization depends on many factors, including society's propensity to subscribe to the idea, understand and digest and synthesize them with their daily practices. An array of activities contributes to the objective of constructing a clearly distinguishable Islamist public sphere in

10 Muhammad I. Ayish, *The New Arab Public Sphere* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2008), 25.

11 Eisenstadt, 'Concluding Remarks', 140.

12 Robert Asen, 'Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics', *Communication Theories* 10, no. 4 (November 2000): 425.

13 Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer, eds., *Counterpublics and the State* (New York: State University of New York, 2001), 161–86.

14 Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

15 Eisenstadt, 'Concluding Remarks', 148.

16 *Ibid.*, 147.

Bangladesh. These actions are autonomous in the sense of not being designed from a single source, yet form part of the overall endeavor as they try to achieve the same set of objectives.

Islamist fiction: pious sensibilities and political actions

In the Habermasian frame there are two kinds of public spheres – the literary and the political. Habermas argued that the literary public sphere emerged through the development of novels out of letter-writing. In his view, novels in eighteenth century Europe restructured ‘the intimacy of the private realm’, which came to be seen as ‘the authentic space of human existence’.¹⁷ This means that an apparently innocuous literary form such as the novel can and does shape the public sphere in a significant fashion. The novel has been an important element in the construction of the bourgeois public sphere and should have the same potential to create new terrain of public sphere or challenge the dominant public sphere. The role of the novel in creating a new public sphere or shaping the public sphere is discussed in various social contexts. Wimal Dissanayake’s study of a Sinhala novel and M.S.C. Okolo’s study of an African novel are cases in point.¹⁸

To engage in a public sphere previously dominated by ‘secularist’ discourses, Islamists in Bangladesh have begun to employ popular cultural products, most notably fiction,¹⁹ particularly the genres of the romance novel and the thriller.

In the last decade, a significant number of fictional works have been published in Bangladesh which can be described as Islamist fiction.²⁰ While such authors are few in number and while their popularity is not yet comparable to any secularist author, these books have a growing following.²¹ Empirically grounded data on the profiles of readers of this fiction are wanting, but Maimuna Huq’s observation that they are ‘from the prestigious circle of upwardly mobile professionals, the powerful communities of high school, college and university students, and the influential associations of small and big businessmen’ may be correct.²²

The growth of this genre is in large measure a response to the popularity of fictional works penned by secularist authors whom the Islamists consider ‘decadent’. Huq has accurately noted that ‘Romance novels with their vividly illustrated covers have been a stronghold of secular literature, one that Islamists could not have imagined as appropriate, at least not for the purpose of Islamisation [sic], even a decade ago’.²³ However this view is changing slowly but steadily and, ‘some Islamic publishers see novels becoming the most popular form of Islamic writing in the near future’.²⁴ The expansion of titles which broadly falls under this category undergirds this optimism.

17 Andrew Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005), 37.

18 Wimal Dissanayake, *Sinhala Novel and the Public Sphere: Three Illustrative Moments* (Colombo: Visidunu Prakashakayo (Pvt) Ltd, 2010); M.S.C. Okolo, ‘Contesting the African Public Sphere: A Philosophical Re-imagining of Power and Resistance in Ngugi’s *Wizard of the Crow*’, *Africa Development* 34, no. 2 (2009): 59–80.

19 The word fiction is used throughout the paper to denote an imaginative creation or a literary work whose content is produced by the imagination and is not necessarily based on fact. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines fiction as ‘something invented by the imagination or feigned; *specifically*: an invented story’.

20 The term ‘Islamist fiction’ is used here for want of a better term. Maimuna Huq described them as Islam-oriented texts. She states that ‘the producers and readers of these novels consider them “Islamic works”’. Maimuna Huq, ‘From Piety to Romance: Islam-Oriented Texts in Bangladesh’, in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, ed. Dale Eickelman, J.W. Anderson and Mark Tessler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 129. Similarly, authors and sellers of these books, in conversations with me, preferred the characterization ‘Islamic novel’.

21 The sellers of these books in Dhaka confided in December 2005 and January 2008 that the buyers are often ‘repeat customers’ (Personal conversations, Dhaka, December 2005 and Dhaka January 2008). Novels written by these authors sell in thousands in each edition and each novel is reprinted several times in a single year.

22 Huq, ‘From Piety to Romance’, 155.

23 *Ibid.*, 141.

24 *Ibid.*, 142.

There is no clearly articulated definition of Islamist fiction in Bangladesh.²⁵ However, one vendor of such fictional works primarily in English, Islamic Fiction Books, defines Islamic fiction as:

creative, imaginative fiction books written by Muslims and marketed primarily to Muslims. Islamic Fiction may be marketed to secular markets, too. The content of these books incorporates some religious content and themes, and may include non-fictionalized historical or factual Islamic content with or without direct reference to the Qur'an or the Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh). The stories may also include modern, real life situations and moral dilemmas.²⁶

It is worth noting that the protagonists also insist on making a clear distinction from 'secular novels'. The website explains that:

All Muslim-authored Fiction books that do not meet the criteria of Islamic Fiction are categorized as Secular Fiction. These books have Muslim characters but the focus of the story is not Islam and the actions of the characters are not attributed to Islam. Secular Fiction books generally do not have any Islamic religious content and are written primarily to appeal to secular markets.

Similar sentiments are echoed by a number of sellers of Islamist literature including fictional works in Bangladesh.

The genre developed in the 1990s as a new breed of Islamists gained prominence in the socio-political arena. Contrary to their predecessors who attempted to reach out to the older generation through propagandist literature and/or lifestyle books, the new younger Islamists intend to reach out to their contemporaries and appeal to their imagination. The emotive significance of fiction is well-known:

Fiction touches people's hearts and emotions in a way that non-fiction and even true-life stories cannot. It moves us, it captures our imaginations, and affirms our understanding of the world and of ourselves. It allows us to work through issues in our lives without actually having to experience the ramifications ourselves. It allows us to explore other cultures from the safety of our homes. It makes us laugh, cry, quake in our shoes, or soar on the heights of joy, providing an emotional outlet and relieving tension and stress. This is why story-telling is a part of every culture.²⁷

Arguably, the Islamist's choice of novel – both romance and thriller – is a political move intended to persuade readers to Islamically imagine various aspects of their lives and the lives of others around them.²⁸ Of course, it is not expected that a text or a specific genre will persuade the public, because:

No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public.²⁹

In this instance these various fictional works are weaving a concatenation of texts – through novel, thriller (and a few other genres which I have not discussed) and already popular lifestyle books.

These fictional works are not only the expressions of the creative imagination of Islamist authors, but a means to spread the message of Islamist politics. Pamela Taylor's call for English language Islamic fiction has clearly demonstrated this point:

25 As noted before, many tend to describe these works as Islamic, instead of Islamist.

26 Islamic Book Fiction, 'Definitions', <http://www.islamicfictionbooks.com/definitions.html>.

27 Pamela Taylor, 'Call for English Language Islamic Fiction', *Petitionspot.com*, July 21, 2006, <http://www.petitionspot.com/petitions/islamicfiction>.

28 Huq, 'From Piety to Romance', 141.

29 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 90.

Fiction can be a powerful tool for dawah (outreach). ... Even though the stories are not 'real,' fiction deals with real issues, real emotions, and the reader relates to the characters like friends or family members. As such, it can have a much greater impact on a person's feelings, thoughts, and beliefs than non-fiction. It can inspire them to question their values and their habits, leading to positive change, both for Muslims and non-Muslims. ... Fiction has the potential to alter lives.³⁰

Apparently the storylines of these novels are no different from their secular counterparts – love, despair, hope – are central. Take, for example, the romance novels of Qasem Abu Bakar, Abdus Salam Mitul and Mosharraf Hossain Shagar. Abu Bakar and Salam Mitul's two most popular fictions – *Prothiksha* (Waiting, 1994) and *Golaper Kanta* (Rose Thorn, 1992) deal with the social lives of the young but overtly discourage what is considered indecent mingling of characters. These novels are infused with moral lessons, overtly and covertly. The ills of immoral acts are highlighted and these stories are intended to imbue a moral standard consistent with the teachings of Islam. The characters are not political activists and thus are not meant to be standard bearers, yet their lives are indicative of the positive elements of leading an Islamic life.

Conspicuously absent in their novels are 'vulgar' language, sexually explicit content, practices that are identified as un-Islamic, and portrayal of Islam in a negative way. Among these authors, as Huq has noted, political Islam is evident in Mosharraf Hossain Shagar's novels. 'In *Abujh Ridoy* (Uncomprehending Heart),³¹ for instance, Shagar describes how the main character becomes an Islamist activist and advances from one cadre to the next in an Islamist group called *Islami Mukti Sangha* (Islamic Liberation Association),'³²

While the romance novels are gaining in popularity, the Islamic thrillers have already created a large readership.³³ The authors who enjoy popularity among readers include Abul Asad, Asad Bin Hafiz, Tawhidul Islam Babu and Hashim Roni, to name but a few. Distributed by various publishers, there are at least four series of thrillers that have attracted readers' attention. They are: Saimoom, Crusade, Operation, and Spy. Among these Saimoom is the longest running thriller series, published by Bangla Shahitya Pariashad (Bengali Literary Council) and authored by Abul Asad. Up to the end of 2007, 44 novels had been published in this series. The author, a member of the central working committee of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and editor of the JI's mouth-piece daily *Sangram*, is also the President of the Bangla Shahitya Pariashad. According to an Islamist website,

Abul Asad is much more known and admired for his thriller series 'Saimum'. Books of this series added a new dimension to Bangladesh literature. It combines heritage, passion and ideology, and inspires the reader to devote his/her life, deeds and loves to Islam.³⁴

The protagonist of the *Saimoom* series is Ahmed Musa, a central Asian Muslim who was driven out by communists and has devoted his life to the cause of Islam since then. As the leader of an international revolutionary group called Saimoom, Ahmed Musa travels around the world to fight for Muslims who are oppressed. For example, in the first two volumes named *Operation Tel-Aviv-1* and *Operation Tel Aviv-2* Musa travels to Israel to support the Palestinians; in the 43rd volume of the series, Musa travels to Southern Thailand and comes to the aid of the Shah family in the city called Sultan Gar. The book entitled *Pattanir Sabuj Aronya* (The Green Forest of Pattani) depicts the plight of the popular Muslim royal family who are now under attack from non-Muslim rulers – who have labeled the family as Muslim revolutionaries.

30 Taylor, 'Call for English Language Islamic Fiction'.

31 1st ed. August 1995; 2nd ed. January 1996.

32 Huq, 'From Piety to Romance', 147.

33 The number of thrillers published on a regular basis is one indication of their popularity. Booksellers in Dhaka have enthusiastically spoken of high regular sales of the thrillers (Discussions with staff of book stores in Dhaka, January 2008).

34 Islam-bd.org, 'Abul Asad', <http://www.islam-bd.org/Personalities/AbulAsad/AbulAsad.htm>.

Musa finds that the terrorists, who are fighting the Royal family, operating under the guise of Muslims, are armed with weapons inscribed in Hebrew.³⁵

The second most popular series, *Crusade*, authored by Asad bin Hafiz, had 30 books in its list as of August 2006. The series is published by Priti Prakashan, a press known to be affiliated with the Jamaat-i-Islami. The series presents the 'history' of crusade blended with stories of the bravery of Saladin and love and hatred. The *Operation* series is set against the 'worldwide Islamic revival' and 'the conspiracy against the Muslims' but focuses on China where, the author claims, Muslims are being persecuted and where 'the freedom struggle of the Muslims is underway'. Tawhidul Islam Babu's narrative reminds readers that the struggle is intrinsically connected to the international conspiracy to suppress Muslims. At the end of 2006, eight books had been published in this series.³⁶

The success of these thrillers has encouraged new writers. *Spy*, the new series that began to appear in late 2006, is a case in point. Hashem Roni's first thriller in this series, entitled *Secret Zone*, is dedicated to Abul Asad and Asad bin Hafiz.³⁷ In the preface of the book the author acknowledges that thriller series like *Saimoom* and *Crusade* have attracted him to thrillers and inspired him to write. Interestingly, he also acknowledged that he was an avid reader of secular thrillers, particularly the most popular secular thriller series titled *Masud Rana*.³⁸ But Roni's thrillers deal with contemporaneous issues and attempt to depict a global conspiracy against the Muslim community irrespective of their national identity and geographical locations.

Despite the salience of contemporaneous issues these fictional works, romance novels and thrillers alike, carry messages related to morality and roles of individuals in the society. The role of women demonstrates these messages quite loudly. Josephine, in the *Saimoom* series, represents the women who are bearers and guardians of tradition, albeit differently. She has dedicated her husband to a greater cause, that of alleviating injustices against the Muslims worldwide. Ahmed Musa, Josephine's husband, has responded to the call of duty. Her personal sacrifice is highlighted through the fact that she lives alone while Ahmed Musa travels far and wide. But, as the Islamists insist, women are principal agents in the family – as wives and as mothers socializing a new generation of activists who would shoulder the building of the Muslim umma (nation). Josephine does the same, by providing support to Musa and raising their son Ahmed Abdullah. Within this framework women's public participation is, however, circumscribed by tradition and an interpretation that is devoid of equality among men and women. Here the chief objective is the creation of an 'ideal woman citizen' responsible for the 'purity' of an Islamic culture.³⁹ This objective is furthered through other media, and the issue has been inserted into public discourse through organizing informal small study groups for women, often seen as piety movements.

35 Abul Asad, *Pattanir Sabuj Aronya, Saimum Series 43* (Dhaka: Bangla Shahittya Parishad, 2006), 77.

36 Tawhidul Islam Babu, *Operation Series* (Dhaka: Priti Prokashan). It is worth noting that the publisher of the books is Asad bin Hafiz.

37 Hashem Roni, *Secret Zone* (Dhaka: Kheya Prokashani, 2006).

38 Masud Rana is a fictional character created by Qazi Anwar Hossain. Originally created in the 1960s modeled after James Bond, the character has matured and changed significantly. The series, with more than 372 books until the end of 2007, is perhaps the longest running spy thriller in Bengali literature and the most widely read. With a new volume each month, the series is known as an 'adult series' because it comprises narratives of sex and violence. The series is popular among younger readers, particularly those who have little access to English thrillers. Many Islamists consider this to be the epitome of decadent literature and allege that the series encourages many vices including promiscuity. For an introductory discussion of the series, see Mahmud Rahman, 'Masud Rana: Super Spy of Transplant Fiction', *Daily Star*, March 10, 2007, <http://thedailystar.net/2007/03/10/d703102101134.htm>.

39 The above characterization is drawn from several episodes of the thriller series entitled *Saimum* by Abul Asad. These points are most vividly illustrated in *Dubo Pahar*, the 42nd volume of the series, particularly in the telephone conversation between Ahmed Musa and Josephine. Abul Asad, *Dubo Pahar* (Dhaka: Bangla Sahitya Parishad, 2006), 6–9.

***Halaqa*: a counterpublic sphere?**

In recent years, the attention of researchers has been drawn to the question of gender rights, equality and empowerment of women on the one hand and increased religiosity among Muslim women, both in Muslim majority and minority countries, on the other. It is argued that the extant approaches, especially secularist liberal interpretations of equality and pathways to women's empowerment, have been inadequate and warrant close scrutiny. Critics have argued that a rigid binary division between modernity and religion and consequent interpretation of the relationship between women and Islam as retrogressive and atavistic is unhelpful for understanding women's subjectivity, agency and modernity. The secularist perspective which insisted that increased religiosity is a sign of regressive trends has not only come under severe criticism, but has been faced with two contending perspectives in recent decades: Islamic feminism⁴⁰ and the Islamist perspective. The latter is closely tied to the Islamist political parties and their line of argument, although they are propagated by women, while the former provides critical examination and reinterpretation of Islamic texts from women's point of view. In addition to these two frameworks, a new strand of studies on the issue of women's empowerment and agency, which I would describe as a 'piety' framework,⁴¹ has emerged. Since the publication of Saba Mahmood's study of women's mosque movement in Egypt, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic revival and the Feminist Subject*,⁴² and Lara Deeb's study of Shi'a women in Beirut, Lebanon, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*,⁴³ social anthropologists are engaged in understanding why women are actively participating in Islamic piety movements. For many researchers the point of departure is

why ... such a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their own 'interests and agendas', especially at a historical moment when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them.⁴⁴

These piety movements are organized in the form of informal group meetings, often referred to as *halaqa*, or *taleem* or study group.

In the context of Bangladesh, Maimuna Huq, Samia Huq, Elora Shehabuddin and Sarah White have studied these groups.⁴⁵ I interviewed members of such groups in Dhaka and

40 Islamic feminism is a fast growing field of study, despite considerable differences of definition among its protagonists. For the framework and principal arguments, see Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text for a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 69–78; Azizah al-Hibri, 'An Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights', in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 63–5; Riffat Hassan, 'Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam', in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooney, William R. Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 54–7; Asma Barlas, 'Believing Women', in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 184–9; Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006), 117–26; Sa'diyya Shaikh, 'Exegetical Violence: Nushuz in Qur'anic Gender Ideology', *Journal for Islamic Studies* 17 (1997): 49–73; and Fatima Mernissi, 'Femininity as Subversion: Reflections on the Muslim Concept of Nushuz', in *Speaking of Faith: Women, Religion, and Social Change*, ed. Diana L. Eck (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986).

41 The framework is yet to be identified with one title; but for want of a better word I use this term in this paper; available studies insist on this aspect although I argue that the piety framework can be questioned.

42 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

43 Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

44 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2.

45 Maimuna Huq, 'Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh: The Politics of "Belief" Among Islamist Women', *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2/3 (2008): 457–88; Maimuna Huq, 'Talking Jihad and Piety: Reformist Exertions among Islamist Women in Bangladesh', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, Special Issue: Islam, Politics, Anthropology, guest edited by Filippo Osella and Benjamin Soares, Issue Supplement s1 (May 2009): S163–82; Samia Huq and Sabina Faiz Rashid, 'Refashioning Islam: Elite Women and Piety in Bangladesh', *Contemporary Islam* 2 (2008): 7–22; Samia Huq and Sabina Faiz Rashid, 'Negotiating Islam: Conservatism, Splintered Authority and Empowerment

Brahmanbaria (a district town located in the east-central region of Bangladesh) in 2008 and 2010.⁴⁶ My analysis draws on these published studies and my discussions with the participants of such groups.

These groups were initially organized to reach middle class and semi-literate/literate segments of the society, but in recent years study circles are being organized at the village level to reach the rural illiterate women. The trend picked up in the early 2000s and spread to various regions of the country, particularly in the north. A reporter who works for a national Bengali daily and travelled to various parts of the country insists that study groups have become a common feature.⁴⁷ In rural areas these sessions are usually called 'taleem'. Sarah White has documented two women who have organized such taleem groups; one woman is a part of the Tabligh Jjamaat movement while the other is independent of any organized efforts. Elora Shehabuddin, in her field research in 2001 and 2003, attended such meetings exclusively organized for women in urban slums where Jamaat-i-Islami activists discussed the Qur'an and imparted the idea that it is a pietistic endeavor rather than a political mobilization.⁴⁸ Maimuna Huq's respondents are members of the female student wing of the JI. Available information suggests that some of these study groups are part of a strategy of the Islamist parties, particularly the Jamaat-i-Islami, while some are emerging 'spontaneously' and/or through individual initiatives. But in any case, the genesis of these study groups can be traced back to, and in large measure are still frequented by, activists of Islamist political organizations, for example the Jamaat-i-Islami.

The study groups organized for women are often viewed as an act of piety rather than an effort to enlist new party members.

Such circles centre more on Qur'anic commentary delivered by the group leader than on group discussion. The goal of such grassroots circles is less to train participants in authoritative Islamic knowledge than to re-moralize individuals and families in a particular neighbourhood (and often in specific socio-economic groups) by imparting a basic knowledge of Qur'anic prescriptions, and to do so by 'returning to the source' – i.e., the Qur'an, as opposed to popular manual-style works such as *Heavenly Ornaments* [a popular book written by Ashraf Ali Thanawi, a Deobandi scholar, in the early 1900s].⁴⁹

in Urban Bangladesh', *IDS Bulletin* 41, no. 2, Special Issue: Negotiating Empowerment (March 2010): 97–105; Elora Shehabuddin, *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Sarah C. White, 'Domains of Contestation: Women's Empowerment and Islam in Bangladesh', *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (2010): 334–44.

- 46 I met members of such a group in rural Brahmanbaria in December 2008. They refer to the group as a 'taleem' group. In our conversations women divulged that they are members of a group where an educated but 'simple' woman (referred to as *apa* – a sister) from Brahmanbaria town visits them every month to discuss Islam and the role of women. The woman leads the discussion. In early 2010, I met educated women in Dhaka who live in middle class neighborhoods and have families. These women informed me that they regularly participate in a study circle which meets at least once in a month but occasionally twice. Their discussion is also 'facilitated' by a 'knowledgeable woman'. The other informants were students of a private university in Dhaka who regularly meet in a group at the university which examines what role a young Muslim woman can play in a society like Bangladesh. They reported that it is not merely question and answer sessions but participants take turns in sharing their readings of the Quran, hadith and texts of Islamic scholars including Abu ala Maududi. Students, particularly one of them, however, repeatedly insisted that she is not a member of the Bangladesh Islami Chattri Sangstha (BICSa).
- 47 Personal communication with Quratul Ain Tahmina, reporter of the *Prothom Alo*, April 24, 2009. Tahmina has also reported on this phenomenon in *Prothom Alo*. Immediately prior to the election in 2008 she reported on a group working in the Dihi Union of Sharsha Upazilla in Jessore district.
- 48 Elora Shehabuddin, *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 193–5, 204–6.
- 49 Huq, 'Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh', 460, cf. 6. Bahisti Jewar, *Heavenly Ornaments* (New Delhi: Taj Publishers, 2002) claims to provide guidelines for living a pious life. Although he argues that women need to be educated, Ashraf Ali Thanvi vehemently opposes western education, particularly for women. He advises that Muslims should send their daughters to brothels rather than marrying them to western educated men.

While most of the studies I have referred to have insisted that these groups are an expression of piety among women, very few studies have adequately defined and laid out their meaning of piety. Amina Wadud made that point in relation to Mahmood's study:

Neither 'politics' nor 'piety' (as elaborated on within the Qur'an by the term *Taqwa*, and then exemplified and interrogated for meaning throughout the history of Islamic mystical movements) was adequately defined to synchronize their choice vis-à-vis her research subjects and anthropological methods of analysis.⁵⁰

One can identify a similar weakness in Deeb's study of Shi'a women, especially chapter five. Her repeated use of the term 'pious' obscures the point she has made elsewhere in the book that there is a diversity of belief and not all can be represented within the term 'the pious'.⁵¹

Maimuna Huq, in an exploration of these study groups in Bangladesh among women activists of the JI pointed out that the study circles not only revolve around the Qur'anic texts and hadiths, but also 'Qur'anic commentaries and theological texts produced by authoritative traditional religious scholars, contemporary or recent'.⁵² The study groups observed by Samia Huq and others also share similar characteristics.

Maimuna Huq further notes that the Islamist lesson circles are a key site for 'the production of a particular form of Islamic subjectivity'.⁵³ Most importantly,

[These] lesson circles play a central role in the sustenance and expansion of Islamic movements in Bangladesh. They do so by helping reshape activists' conceptions of self, religious duty and others through a rhetoric that deploys specific notions of religiosity and religious identity, culture, state, the global Muslim community or *ummah*, and the current world order.⁵⁴

Samia Huq and Sabina Faiz Rashid, in their examination of a study group of elite women in Dhaka,⁵⁵ conclude that the new Islamic subjectivity empowers the women in various ways. The study group in question was initiated by a foreign diplomat's wife in 2002; it not only continued after her departure from the country in 2004 but expanded significantly to include new members. The study demonstrates that these reading sessions play a pivotal role in Islamization of the public sphere as they help participants convert existing and familiar spaces in which they found a voice to articulate and express agency. These study groups are unique on two counts: first, apparently they represent a tension between two conflicting tendencies: traditionalism (i.e. adherence to a literal translation of the Qur'an and the Hadith) on the one hand, and Islamic 'reformism' on the other. These groups, particularly that to which Huq and Rashid refer, are intended to strengthen the women's understandings of the canonical texts to reinforce traditional gender roles.⁵⁶ Secondly, these groups also aim to 'carve out spaces of independence and authority for themselves', an objective which contradicts the traditionalist interpretation. Through participation in these study groups, 'women view themselves as modern women, who are committed to remoulding self, family and community in order to ensure a more prominent and visible Islam in personal and public life'.⁵⁷

50 Amina Wadud, 'Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (September 2006): 815–18.

51 For a review of the book and discussion on this point, see Ussama Makdisi, 'Real Muslims, Real Lives', *MRZine*, February 16, 2008, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2008/makdisi160208.html>.

52 Huq, 'Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh', 457.

53 *Ibid.*, 459.

54 *Ibid.*, 459.

55 Huq and Rashid, 'Refashioning Islam'.

56 Despite the claim that this group is a result of a spontaneous effort and does not have any political leaning, the texts used are indicative of its inclination toward the JI. The texts studied and discussed in this group are written by Abul Ala Maududi. Huq and Rashid notes, 'While the participants were free to bring along with them any translation of the Quran they liked, the teacher as well as [the] majority of the participants followed the translation and explanations offered by Maulana S. Abul Ala Maududi in his "The Meaning of the Quran"' (Huq and Rashid, 'Refashioning Islam', 9).

57 Huq and Rashid, 'Refashioning Islam', 8.

However, it is important to note that the question of agency and empowerment is not unproblematic. Indeed, 'new found knowledge, the feeling of being divinely guided and introspection provide the women with the ability to exercise agency in situations which they did not contest (or felt ill-equipped to contest) in the past' but 'contestation and agency have not altered the existing order of gender relations'.⁵⁸

Although personal piety is often cited as the reason for establishing these groups, over time redefining the community and society and engaging in *dawa* become the objectives of these groups. The experiences of the study groups observed by Maimuna Huq, and by Samia Huq and Sabina Faiz Rashid, bear out this trajectory. One of the women stated: 'We have been researching and listening to what to do for many years. It's time to do more, to spread the message around. Without bringing others into the fold, we are not fulfilling our obligations as God's representatives on earth.'⁵⁹ This aspiration is not entirely a personal realization or exceptionally pious action, but a common trajectory of the members who are attending study groups in and outside Bangladesh. It is worth mentioning here that these groups are rapidly proliferating both in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority areas. There are a number of examples of such movements in various parts of the world including the United States.⁶⁰ For example, in Sana'a (Yemen) such study circles are founded for middle class women;⁶¹ in Pakistan the Al-Huda Islamic school has taken a more organized form;⁶² in Malaysia 'Sisters in Islam' has made its mark in the social arena,⁶³ as well as the Majlis Doa,⁶⁴ in Thailand Banatulhuda has gained prominence;⁶⁵ in Indonesia the piety and women's groups role are being vigorously being debated;⁶⁶ in Sri Lanka since 1990, Al Muslimaath has emerged as a major organization in urban areas of Sri Lanka, particularly in Colombo. The purpose of Al Muslimaath in Sri Lanka, is 'to do *Da'wa* with emphasis on social and welfare activities, for the upliftment of women in particular and the society at large in Sri Lanka'.⁶⁷ This remains a key objective of the groups mentioned earlier. This objective, whether observed by Saba Mahmood in Egypt, Samia Huq in Bangladesh or Farzana Hanifa in Sri Lanka, makes it difficult for the groups to be seen as entirely pietistic movements, because their analyses seem to miss the essence of *dawa*. The criticism of Mahmood by Samah Selim is equally applicable to the general thrust of most of the studies that adopted the framework. Selim argues:

What I miss in her analysis of both the concept and the movement is a notion of *da'wa* as an explicit modality of politics and power that is not only directed inward to a physical embodiment of the spiritual self, but outwards, at a network of *other* bodies.[3] Mahmood translates this form of solicitation as a 'pedagogy of persuasion', but it can equally be understood as a form of 'conversion', particularly when one thinks in terms of the movement's broader strategic goals as opposed to its tactics. Indeed, it is the absence of this broader viewpoint – a critical reading of the entire range of the

58 Huq and Rashid, 'Refashioning Islam', 20.

59 Quoted in *ibid.*, 15.

60 Halaqaa or reading groups are becoming common among the diasporic Bangladeshi, and perhaps other Muslims in North America. Some of these groups are multi-ethnic. Many of these groups are segregated by gender, but some are mixed-gender gatherings.

61 Janine Clark, 'Islamic Women in Yemen: Informal Nodes of Activism', in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 164–84.

62 Sadaf Ahmed, 'Identity Matters, Culture Wars: An Account of Al-Huda (re)Defining Identity and Reconfiguring Culture in Pakistan', *Culture and Religion* 9, no. 1 (2008): 63–80.

63 Yasmin Moll, "'People Like Us" in Pursuit of God and Rights: Feminist Discourse and Sisters in Islam in Malaysia', *Journal of International Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 40–55.

64 Sylvia Frisk, 'Claiming Religious Space: Malay Women and the Transformation of Rituals in Urban Context', *NIAS-nytt Asia Insight* (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies), no. 4 (2004): 10–11.

65 Amporn Marddent, 'Gendering Piety of Muslim Women in Thailand', http://arts2.wu.ac.th/SSS/sss_v19/10%20aj.amporn-%20gendering%20piety%20of%20muslim%20women%20in%20thailand.pdf.

66 Rachel Rinaldo, 'The Islamic Revival and Women's Political Subjectivity in Indonesia', *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (2010): 422–31.

67 Al Muslimaath: Sri Lanka Association of Muslim Women and Girls Souvenir of the Al Muslimaath inauguration project. Muslim Women in the Midst of Change, November 30, 1991, quoted in Farzana Hanifa, 'Piety as Politics Among Muslim Women in Contemporary Sri Lanka', *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2/3 (2008): 353.

piety movement's institutional and pedagogic activities ('establishing neighborhood mosques, social welfare organizations, Islamic educational institutions, and printing presses, as well as urging fellow Muslims toward greater religious responsibility, either through preaching or personal conversation' p.58) – that allows Mahmood to define the women's piety movement as a purely ethical and entirely positive project of personal cultivation and to ignore its function as a politically prescriptive project in its own right.[4]⁶⁸

Although Maimuna Huq is arguing that these are pietistic endeavors, her analysis of the activities of her subject group – Bangladesh Islami Chattri Sangshta (BICSa or Bangladesh Female Students Islamic Association) – proves otherwise.⁶⁹ Huq has clearly stated that BICSa 'argue [s] that given the intimate relations between state and society and the power the state wields over society in the present day world Islamization of the public sphere is essential to the successful cultivation of faith at home'.⁷⁰

One may argue that not all study groups have emerged as a planned political effort, but it cannot be denied that these reading groups in Bangladesh have emerged in the context of the debate about the role of women in society. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the non-governmental development organizations (commonly referred to as NGOs) in Bangladesh initiated an array of projects which involved poor women in rural areas. Consistent with the contemporaneous developmental ideologies advocated by the international community, women became the key actors of non-governmental development activities. Islamists opposed these projects and often violently confronted the NGOs. Subsequently the Islamists changed their strategy, founded NGOs and became engaged in welfare and development activities.⁷¹ These organizations also embarked on a journey to redefine the gender role and the role of women in the public domain.

In addition to primary texts such as the Qur'an and Hadiths, Maududi's writings on women's role in society remain the key texts used in these study groups, irrespective of the social status of the participants. Maududi argues that women are the 'mightiest fortress of Islamic culture' and therefore to be protected at any cost. Also central to Maududi's interpretations of Qur'an and Hadith is the hierarchy of men and the segregation of women. His construction of a good Muslim woman involves confinement at home and motherhood as the ultimate goal.⁷²

These discussions are opening up the opportunity to subject Islam to dialogue and civil debate because it is not only the role of women that is being discussed in these groups but other social practices also. No longer are these debates informed only by the various strands of 'secularist' paradigms, but a reading of Qur'an and Hadiths and their interpretations. But we must also be cognizant that simply rereading these texts or reengaging with the classical texts is not sufficient to produce a different subjectivity among women. They do not have, by definition, the potential to produce new understanding on women's role or gender equality. These readings are at best 'reformation' not 'reconstruction'. Here I am utilizing the framework for understanding the Christian and Judaic feminist tradition to examine the contemporary debate on the emancipatory potential of these reading groups. Within the Christian and Judaic feminist the central question is: what is

68 Samah Selim, 'Book Review: Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject', *Jadaliyya*, November 12, 2010, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/235/book-review_politics-of-piety_the-islamic-revival-and-the-feminist-subject. Numbers within the square brackets refer to the page numbers in Mahmood's book.

69 Huq did acknowledge that her subject group's view differs from pietistic movements such as the Tabligh and mosque movement observed by Saba Mahmood. Huq, 'Talking Jihad and Piety', S177.

70 Ibid., S176.

71 Discussion on NGO activities and their opposition to women's involvement abounds. I have dealt with the issues in *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); see also Taj I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh, Beyond Subjection and Tyranny* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), 134–79; Elora Shehabuddin, *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 111–15.

72 For a detailed discussion on Maududi's position on women, see Lamia Rustom Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women Under Fundamentalist Islam*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 23–48; and Roy Jackson, *Mawlana Mawdudi and Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2011), 133–9.

the aim of returning to the holy text? The answer can be either reformation or reconstruction. Reformation implies that one begins the readings on the premise that the text is limited by historical context, but some of the elements are universal/essential while some are relative. Reconstruction implies a complete departure from this premise to 'regard the holy text as androcentric and manmade in the interest of men'. In the words of Roald, 'a reform would imply a degree of acceptance of existing ideas, whereas a reconstruction would imply a refutation of the same ideas'.⁷³ Also important is radical reconceptualization of the authoritative production and transmission of religious knowledge. It precisely involves questioning the sources of knowledge. Although the available studies of the Qur'an study groups imply that they provide opportunity to women to redefine the text, it is not borne out by closer examination of their usage of texts, especially when their readings are infused with exegesis written by male authors such as Maududi. By adopting the exegeses of patriarchal ideologues of political Islam, the emancipatory potential remains elusive at best.

Conclusion

The construction of the Islamist public sphere in Bangladesh is a challenge to the notion that the public sphere is a homogenous, secular and liberal democratic site. Despite the existence of multivocality in the public sphere in Bangladesh, the religiously informed voices were absent. Thus this emerging voice is adding a new plurality to the public sphere. But the question remains whether this new sphere will lead to the fragmentation of the larger public sphere,⁷⁴ and whether it has the democratic potential to challenge the religious authorities.

In the past decade it has been vigorously argued by academics and some policy makers in the United States that there is an emerging Muslim public sphere that incorporates a greater variety of participants, addresses more diverse publics and is contributing to the development of a wider range of interpretations. Drawing on the emerging public sphere in the Middle East, a number of scholars argued that this public sphere critically engages with both the nation-state and the established Muslim authorities. Dale F. Eickelman insisted in 1999 that 'Without fanfare, the notion that Islam should be the subject of dialogue and civil debate is gaining ground. This new sense of public space is shaped by increasingly open contests over the use of the symbolic language of Islam'. Additionally,

The combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created. It feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.⁷⁵

The euphoria, however, did not last long. Soon analysts began to point out that the newly emerging sphere is less participatory than it was, at least in theory, promised to be. In many instances the new authority only replaced the earlier ones, and these new ones were no less restrictive. This should not come as a surprise because such possibility was not discounted even by those who insisted on the emergence of a counterpublic. Nancy Fraser reminded us of this downside in unequivocal terms in the context of subaltern counterpublics:

73 Anne Sofie Roald, 'Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought', in *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*, ed. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomslund (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), 18–19.

74 I draw this point from Nilufer Gole, 'Snapshots of Islamic Modernity', in *Multiple Modernities*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 111.

75 Dale F. Eickelman, 'The Coming Transformation of the Muslim World', *Foreign Policy Research Institute WIRE* (Philadelphia, PA) 7, no. 9 (August 1999). Internet publication by the Commonwealth Institute by permission July 1999: <http://www.comw.org/pda/muslim799.html>.

I do not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian; and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization.⁷⁶

The case of the emerging Islamist public sphere in Bangladesh which only subscribes to one interpretation of Islam indicates that the traditional authorities are now being replaced by the Islamist interpretation advanced by ideologues such as Abul Ala Maududi. I am arguing that it is an intrinsic part of the Islamization process conceived by those with a political agenda of bringing changes to the extant socio-political system and mores. Islamization does not only refer to political activism and political expressions but the wider impact – cultural, religious or others – it has come to have on contemporary Muslim societies. In the view of the Islamists, the foundation of an Islamic state comes later than Islamization of the society.⁷⁷ The essential elements of the public sphere that it is unfettered, democratic and critical seem to be absent in the current construction of the Islamist public sphere.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the treatment of women within this newly emerging public sphere. The portrayals of Muslim women and the study circles (*halaqa*) provide them with a new visibility within the society but also impose constraints on them as they are asked to subscribe to one specific authority of interpretation of their roles in society. This is an inherent contradiction of Islamism, as noted by Nilufer Gole:

Islamism calls for women's agency and engenders their individualization, yet it also restrains them. Islamism provides women with access to public life, but this is an access limited by contribution to the good of the community. The politicization of the 'Islamic way of life' carries the potential to hinder women's individual choices of life, professional strategies, and personal expressions. Islamism offers modern life to Muslim women, but it is a forbidden form of modernity.⁷⁸

The authenticity and survivability of any public sphere, including counterpublics, depends on its embeddedness in the society. It is a cliché to say that the public sphere cannot exist without being indigenously based. No doubt, ongoing globalization will impact on the reshaping and the construction of new spaces/voices within the existing public sphere, but it must be rooted in the local society and its sustenance must come from indigenous traditions. The emerging Islamist public sphere is yet to demonstrate that it is connecting to the Islamic traditions of the Bangladeshi society. The global trend of Islamism seems to be the driving force behind these new initiatives. The absence of reference to local syncretistic traditions in the new Islamist discourse makes its authenticity suspect. To date, there are very few indications of willingness to engage in a creative synthesis of the traditional and current.

Notes on contributor

Ali Riaz is Professor and Chair of Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA. He previously taught at universities in Bangladesh, England and South Carolina. He also worked as Broadcast Journalist at British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service in London. Riaz's publications include, *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia* (2008); *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web* (2008); and *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (2004). His recently edited volumes are *Religion and Politics in South Asia* (2010) and *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (2010). His forthcoming publication is titled, *Islam and Identity Politics among British-Bangladeshis: A Leap of Faith* (2013).

⁷⁶ Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

⁷⁷ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women Under Fundamentalist Islam*, 29.

⁷⁸ Gole, 'Snapshots of Islamic Modernity', 101.