

The Impact of Secularism on Bangladesh

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The Temple of Understanding Internship 2016

July 29, 2016

Despite intense years of conflict and tension in the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh has proudly endured forty-five years of independence. During the era of the British Indian Empire, which lasted from 1858 to 1947, the present-day countries of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan were under British rule and control. This area served as a great source of wealth for the United Kingdom, which utilized Bengali's raw materials to their advantage. Farmers and craftsmen in the region were forced to provide labor to the Empire and were the main providers of raw jute. It was not until 1947 that these conditions changed; Queen Victoria ruled the British East India Company and the British Indian Empire no longer included Pakistan and India, an event known as the Partition of India (*The Story of Bangladesh*). Both Pakistan and India became sovereign states known as the Dominion of Pakistan and the Dominion of India. Soon thereafter, in 1956, Pakistan split into West Pakistan and East Pakistan, which were separated by approximately 990 miles of India's land.

East Pakistan became the agricultural station between the two and heavily relied on West Pakistan for funding and management. Additionally, East Pakistanis were subject to the control of West Pakistan and their centralized government. West Pakistan exploited East Pakistan's valuable resources for money; West Pakistan controlled the industries, banks, and insurance companies, while East Pakistan was home to the resources and factories to produce goods for West Pakistan, as well as the majority of the population (*The Story of Bangladesh*). Additionally, tensions between the two areas intensified regarding culture and language. Despite the fact that there were many ethnic groups and languages present in West Pakistan, the country established Urdu as their national language because it was the language of the elites. The people of East Pakistan attempted to get their language to become the official language, but faced challenges with the West Pakistani government. Therefore, East Pakistanis started the language movement and began protesting in 1952; they saw this issue as a cultural struggle, which would eventually, over the next two decades, develop into a political struggle. When a military dictatorship assumed power over East and West Pakistan in 1958, matters got worse and East Pakistanis felt even more marginalized. These tensions inspired the Awami League, one of the two largest political parties in the region, to begin the Six Point Movement, which was in total support of Bengali nationalism (Kazi). Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman, who demanded that East Pakistanis reap the same political and economic benefits as West Pakistanis, spearheaded this movement.

The next watershed moment came along with the December 1970 Pakistani election, during which the Awami League won a shocking 160 out of 162 seats in East Pakistan based on its, “Six-Point formula, which was a program for political and economic emancipation of Bengalis” and the large population and support from East Pakistanis ((Mohsin [471])). However, this moment proved too good to be true for those in East Pakistan, as West Pakistan delayed the opening session, on March 1st, 1971, of the National Assembly indefinitely. West Pakistan feared the potential power that East Pakistan could have had with the Awami League in power; therefore, West Pakistan aimed to forbid any power in the hands of East Pakistan. Little did West Pakistan realize that this was the last straw for East Pakistan, and the Bangladesh Independence Movement began immediately. Within one day, the new Bangladesh flag was exposed in public. Within one week, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave a speech about the independence movement in which he famously stated, “Our struggle is for our freedom. Our struggle is for our independence.” Furthermore, the official declaration of independence of East Pakistan came on March 26, 1971. Throughout the war between West and East Pakistan, it became clear that West Pakistan had the upper hand due to their strong and unified military, while East Pakistan relied on guerilla warfare (Kazi). Therefore, East Pakistan enlisted help from their neighbor, India, who assisted East Pakistan in defeating West Pakistan. On December 16, 1971, Pakistani forces surrendered to East Pakistan and signed the *Instrument of Surrender*.

The Constitution of Bangladesh was established a year after West Pakistan surrendered to what became Bangladesh. The four main pillars of the document were nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism. The government pledged to not actively promote any religion and promised to acknowledge all religions in the new country, though the first few rulers of the country would soon ignore these claims. The first military rule Bangladesh had was under General Ziaur Rahman (1976-1981), who allowed some Islamic parties to be involved in politics under the Political Party Regulation Act, though this was forbidden in the Constitution. Next, General Ershad threw out the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which was created under Rahman, and took

over power while implementing Islam into the country. General Ershad made Islam the state religion in 1988 and even incorporated the line, “complete trust and faith in almighty Allah” into the Constitution (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress). The establishment of Islam as the state religion instantly affected religious minorities. Moreover, many of the people who became leaders during this time had previously been facilitators for the Pakistani armies during the independence movement. Therefore, civil society felt exploited by their leader, Ershad, for enabling the murderers of many people’s loved ones to have a role in the government (Kazi). When the Bangladesh Nationalist Party assumed power, it was strongly allied with Jamaat-Islami and the BNP helped this group murder innocent professors at universities in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, because of their local ties. Democratic Rule took over the country in 1991, but political parties have continued to appeal to religious groups in the country in order to gain electoral benefits, rather than fighting the rise of extremism.

The current issues in the country of Bangladesh are rooted in the cultural issues that arose before the country even sought independence. Over time, however, Islam has crept into all parts of Bangladeshi society, even into the education system with ubiquitous *madrasas* in cities like Dhaka. In these *madrasas*, the curriculum is solely based on the study of Islam and everything related to the religion including the Qur’an and the *hadith*. The children in these schools are not receiving education in any other subject areas, which has sparked issues within the government. However, the government is unable to control all of the *madrasas* because many of them guard their independence and refuse government money, which they see as a needless incentive to create a more open curriculum. Most *madrasas* support themselves with local donations and deny the government any involvement in their work. These schools are merely adding to the overwhelming 90% Muslim population in the country. In an interview with Faiyaz Murshid Kazi, he expressed how migrant workers who come to Bangladesh are part of the broader issue because not only are they semi-skilled and uneducated, but they also pride themselves on their belief in the **one** form of Islam, which is the only way, in their minds, the religion can be practiced. Therefore, he stated, this is one of the reasons why Bangladesh abides by secularism, as it is a separation of state and religion and more of a

“peace symbiosis” between religion and culture, which can prove to be beneficial for all of society.

Today, Bangladesh faces threats from many terrorist groups and homegrown militant groups. Over the past few years, Bangladesh has witnessed countless deaths of secular bloggers, foreigners, and religious minorities. The messages of these attacks, which are usually conducted under the name of Islam, completely contradict the ideal of secularism. According to Article 12 of the Constitution, under the Fundamental Principles of State Policy, “The principle of secularism shall be realized by the elimination of...(c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.” Despite these words, attacks in the name of religion have still occurred in the country, especially within the capital city of Dhaka.

The biggest questions then become: what measures should be taken in order to prevent further attacks on the country? How should people begin to abide by the words of the Constitution? How can Bangladesh successfully implement secularism into society, despite the conflicting opinions of secularism, especially from a political standpoint? I spoke to David Campbell, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, and he suggested that issues between religion and politics are subject to change. There is no reason to think that the current configuration will remain indefinitely, but there is also no reason to believe that these changes would come rapidly. Mr. Michael De Dora, from the Center for Inquiry, suggested that the biggest challenge to successfully implementing secularism in the society of Bangladesh is,

“dogma: a lack of critical thinking -- a rigid, commitment to fundamentalist ideology. Dogma is not limited to any particular religious or non-religious group; it is common across all groupings of human beings, though it seems more widespread and intense amongst monotheism. But, wherever it is, it makes inclusive secularity nearly impossible” (De Dora).

In order to prevent future attacks in Bangladesh, it is vitally important for parents to remain connected with their children on a daily basis. Mr. Kazi also advocated for this response to the situation at hand because, “Parents and teachers have a big impact, too. Even what you say at the dinner table can have a big impact” (Kazi). He mentioned that any pejorative comment made about Hindus or Christians, for example, creates an

impact on a child. He stated that parents should explain to their children the equality between all religions, as stated in their Constitution. Mr. Kazi stressed how these religious and political conflicts have existed for many years that at this point, what matters is the attitude people take in response to their situations and those around them. In regards to how people should abide by the Constitution, this will come naturally once the role of secularism takes a stronger stance in Bangladeshi society because people will begin to realize how beneficial a secular society can actually be for the entire society, including those of various faiths. The mission of the Temple of Understanding is to achieve peaceful coexistence among individuals, communities and societies, through interfaith education. The issue of secularism in Bangladesh is a prime example of the importance of the continuing work of Temple of Understanding

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