

**ISLAMIZATION IN BANGLADESH
UNDER ERSHAD**

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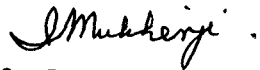
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This is to certify that the dissertation titled "ISLAMIZATION IN BANGLADESH UNDER ERSHAD" submitted by Madhusree Banerjee in fulfilment of six credits out of total requirement of twenty four credits for the award of Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) of the University, is her original work according to the best of my knowledge and may be placed before examiners for evaluation.


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CHPATER I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Islam in its pure form is at once a religion and a total way of life. The dynamics of Islam has been such that it is today the most discussed religion. It was Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith who for the first time made a detailed survey of the contemporary developments in the Islamic world. He examined the nature of the transformation sweeping the different Islamic populations in various countries throughout the world and tried to picture the Islamic world adjusting itself to the power politics and economics of the twentieth century. Prof. Smith came to the conclusion that this religion was alive and dynamic. His studies revealed that the questions before the Islamic world was how to close the gap between conviction and the larger modernising world. Prof Smith observed that the trends offered highly varied patterns and potentialities ranging from attempts to emotionalise Islam into closed system bordering on revivalism to working for an open, rich onward vision.¹

1. For details see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Islam in Modern History (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957)

Indeed, the history of Islam in past two and half centuries shows the interaction of different forms of Muslim experience in the context of modern world history.

A significant factor is that the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were times of active Muslim revivalist movements whose emergence was influenced not so much by modern society of the West but the contradictory motivations that arose within Islam. The Wahabi Movement in the Arabian Peninsula is an example. This movement was significant because it created a momentum on which the later revivalists could build.

By the end of the nineteenth century all parts of the Islamic world were under significant contact with western economic and imperial power and fundamental issues were raised by the visibly dominant power of non-Muslim West. Muslims began to deal with ideological questions in defending and redefining Islam in the new circumstances. A desire to gain independence from western control grew and the question arose how best to gain that independence².

The first half of the twentieth century saw a variety of programmes the major ones being secular reformist nationalism of people like Mustafa Kemal Ataturk of Turkey, liberal modernism in

2. John Obert Voll, Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World. (England, West View Press, 1982) p.6

works of Mohammad Iqbal of India and some Arab writers and neo-fundamentalism in a variety of formats like Saudi Monarchy or Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.³

After World War II the political systems of most Muslim countries were changed dramatically as most of these states gained independence after the breakup of old European Empires. One of the major themes of the period was the apparent subordination of Islam to other causes like helping people to mobilise for political independence. Islam also came into conflict with modernist ideology especially the new forms of socialism advocated after independence. Many people viewed fundamentalist Islam as a reactionary force and militant fundamentalism was often in conflict with the leading movements of socialist reforms. At the same time fundamentalist activism grew as an underground opposition to established modernising regimes. The Muslim Brotherhood formed the basis for the opposition to Nasser's regime in Egypt, the religious leaders formed the focus of opposition against the Shah of Iran.⁴

However, there are some other recent developments which add fresh dimensions to the nature of the attempted transformation of Pan-Islamism with the growing prosperity of certain West Asian

3. *ibid.* p.6

4. *ibid* p.5-6

countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, placing them in a position of economic and ideological leadership. The rise of ideological and intellectual movements sponsored by petro-wealth which are seeking to penetrate the Islamic countries are related to this.⁵

Middle Eastern Islam is inevitably political because countervailing secular organisations and ideologies have not developed in these societies. Thus Islam remains the major channel of mass participation in these political system otherwise lacking mobilisational capabilities.⁶

Nearer home, in South East Asia, two countries with Muslim majority are Malaysia and Indonesia. In Malaysia Islamic revivalism has proved to be more of a vehicle for articulating the needs of the economically dispossessed and politically deprived and has so far outweighed other possible fallout.^{6a}

In South Asian Muslim countries inspite of apparent similarities in their orientations towards problems of Islam and social change, the revivalist movements are not unified with the Muslim world. Each of these groups carries a distinctive mark of

5. Imtiaz Ahmed, "Introduction" in Carre ed., Islam and the State in the World Today, (New Delhi, Manohar 1987) pp xx-xxi.
6. For details see Mohammad Ayooob ed., Politics of Resurrgent Islam, (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House 1982)
- 6a. John Funston, "Malaysia", in *ibid* pp 165-187

unique social and political environment within which it operates. While intellectual developments in other Muslim societies and international events that affect all Muslims have their impact on South Asian Muslims, their influence is mediated by indigenous forces.⁷

The Wahabi Movement which originated in Saudi Arabia in early nineteenth century had its repercussions in the Indian sub-continent. But it was only in the late 1930s that the need for a separate geo-political entity to protect the Islam adherents of the sub-continent got crystalised and Pakistan was born. It was therefore natural that once Pakistan was achieved it would become an Islamic state.⁸ Pakistan's political creation was related to Islam. The Muslims of British India had consciously chosen the option in order to have their own independent state. Thus with the creation of Pakistan the ability of South Asian Muslims to create an Islamic state was put to test.

In the decades following the creation of Pakistani State in its Islamic experience two major themes were very important - one was the continuing failure to create a viable consensus on the meaning of an Islamic state and the other was the intellectual

7. Mumtaz Ahmed, "Islamic Revival in Pakistan" in *ibid* p.190-227

8. For details see Aziz Ahmed, Modernism in India and Pakistan, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press 1967) pp. 156-164

validity of the Pakistani Muslims' redefinition of Islam in the modern context. A significant role of Islam in the politics of Pakistan was that it did not provide a commonly accepted concrete programme of action. Islam was rather a vaguely defined sentiment which was in different forms common to all Pakistanis. There was insufficient consensus on the specific meaning of Islamic state, and other socio-cultural identities began to emerge as the basis of political action.⁹

Seeking political power for establishment of classical Islamic system is a new phenomenon which was unknown before. It started with the establishment of the Hanbali/Ibn Taimia/Wahabila version of Islam in Arabia by the Saudi dynasty during the last century. In recent past the Ikhwanul Musilmoon and Jamaat-i-Islami represent this tradition. According to this tradition the state is the best and by implication the only agency through which Islamic system can be given concrete shape.¹⁰

An Islamic system of government requires fulfilment of two basic conditions : firstly, a set of general principles, for example need of a politically organised society and secondly, application of Islamic legislation. Any system that fulfils these two conditions are entitled to be Islamic.¹¹

9. Voll, n2 p.233-234

10. Anwar Moazzam, "Resurgence of Islam" Role of the State and the People in Anwar Moazzam ed., Islam and Contemporary Muslim World. (New Delhi, Light and Life Publications 1981) p. 4-5.

11. Al Mahadi, Al Sadiq, "Islam Society and Change" in John Esposito ed., Voices of Resurgent Islam (New York, Oxford University Press, 1983) p.236

An Islamic state thus cannot be isolated from society because it is a comprehensive integrated way of life. The western concept of division between private and public, the state and society that is familiar to western culture is alien to Islam.¹² The state is regarded as a political expression of Islamic society. The fundamental principle of belief has many consequences for an Islamic state: firstly, it is not a secular state and all public life is religious; secondly, Islamic state is not a nationalistic state because the ultimate allegiance is owed to the Almighty Allah and thereby to the community of believers or Ummah; thirdly, Islamic state is not an absolute or sovereign entity, it is subject to higher norms or Shariah that represents the will of the Allah.¹³

The Pakistani experiment with Islamization in the orthodox sense has not succeeded probably because in South Asia intricate relationships exist between religious identity and political purpose. According to Surjit Mansingh, religious identity is only one of the variable of political culture in South Asia along with ethnic, regional, linguistic, economic and ideological identities.¹⁴

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12. In Turkey under Kamal Ataturk's leadership a type of secular state was experimented with.
 13. Hussain Turabi, "The Islamic State" in n.10, p.241-242
 14. Surjit Mansingh, "Political uses of Religious Identity in South Asia" in James Warner Bjorkman ed., Fundamentalism Revivalists and Voilence in South Asia, (New Delhi, Manohar 1988) p.170.

The above statement is very clearly borne out by the long process through which Bangladesh gradually evolved its distinct identity and by virtue of that was able to acquire an independent nation status in 1971.

Bangladesh (the second largest Muslim state of the World) in its constitution adopted in 1972 enshrined secularism as one of the four basic principles of state policy with specific restriction on using religion for political purposes. But over the years the scenario has been changing. The state as represented by the government has been taking overt as well covert actions to Islamize the Bangladesh society. The efforts has not yielded any remarkable results. Rather the measures have been restricted by popular movements and Islam-Pasand parties neutralised by election verdicts. But since Bangladesh, unlike Pakistan, was not born out of religio-politico demands the Islamization attempts needs to be carefully studied. With the above objective in view the following chapters deal with Islamization in Bangladesh with special reference to the process of General H M Ershad under whose guardianship the initially secular Bangladesh has adopted Islam as the State Religion.

CHAPTER II

ISLAMIZATION TILL THE EMERGENCE
OF BANGLADESH - AN OVERVIEW

CHAPTER II

ISLAMIZATION TILL THE EMERGENCE OF BANGLADESH

AN OVERVIEW

Undivided Bengal was a Muslim majority state as the census of 1872 revealed. This surprised many observers.

Three theories have been put forward to explain conversion to Islam in the Indian sub-continent - first, "religion of the sword" according to which Indians were forcibly converted; second "political patronage" which holds the view that Indians converted themselves for some non-religious favours from the ruling class and third, "social liberation" a significant part in this process was played by warrior saints who were eager to take up the cause of a persecuted community.¹ As far as the area that now constitute Bangladesh is concerned, the third theory seems to be nearer the truth.

With the coming of the Sena rule in Bengal a change seemed to have set in the social and religious arena and Buddhism started declining.² Hinduism was revived in Bengal by the Hindu rulers of the Sena dynasty. The method adopted by them

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1. Abdul Momin Choudhury, "Conversion of Islam in Bengal" in S R Chakraborty and Virendra Narain (ed) Bangladesh Volume I History and Culture - South Asia Studies Series 12, (New Delhi, South Asia Publishers 1985) p.1-3.
 2. *ibid* p.6

was not always peaceful persuasion. The result was that with the advent of the Muslims they were looked upon not as invaders, but as deliverers from the tyranny of Hindu rule.³

Islam, like all other world religions, has adopted itself to various climates and cultures. Islam practiced in the Muslim World is distinctly different from the Islam practiced in South Asia and South East Asia. Variations in the process of change in each Muslim state and diversity in their institutions, cultures and historical experience are responsible for reactions and adjustments of Muslim states and communities to the challenges they face in today's modern world.⁴ This is true of Islam in Bengal too. Islam has taken on local characteristics which makes it different from Islam elsewhere in the world. In spite of the great political power that the Muslim rulers gradually came to acquire over the country, it was neither possible nor did they intend to wipe out local traditions which were deeply rooted in the rich accumulation of Buddhist and Hindu culture for at least fifteen hundred years.⁵

Thus in a study of Islamization in Bengal, it has to be borne in mind that Islam is not a primary but a secondary culture

3. Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, Muslim Community of the Indo-Pak Sub-Continent New Delhi, (Renaissance Publishing House, 1985) p.72.
4. Philip H. Stoddard, "Themes and Variations" in Philip H Stoddard, David C Cuthell and Margaret M Sullivan ed., Change and the Muslim World, (New York, Syracuse University Press 1981) p.14.
5. Anwar Ali, "Muslim Mind and Society in Bangladesh" in Asghar Ali Engineer ed., Islam in South and South East Asia, (India, Ajanta Publications 1985) p. 185

i.e., "exogenous and not endogenous to the particular region".⁶ Islam was not a great tradition that entered a land that was culturally virgin. As a result there was a long period of cultural intermixture between the indigenous and the new. However, the synthesis was not absolute and its contours remain undetermined even today.⁷ As a result, according to some interpretations, a form of "corrupt", "folk" or "popular" Islam emerged in Bengal.⁸ It is so called since it was markedly different from the Islam practiced in the Islamic heartland of the world.

Islam came to Bengal largely through activities of the Sufis. Sufism had certain philosophical notion similar to Vedanta Hinduism. Because of the soil and climatic conditions the people of Deltaic Bengal have developed certain characteristics, for example, they are highly emotional people. Kazi Abdul Wadud points out that as a result the Persian variety of Islam i.e., Sufism rather than Arabian "Puritanic" variety of Islam made such a great appeal to the masses of Bengal.⁹ Thus Bengali Islam has developed its own cultural distinctness which may be termed as

 6. Ashim Roy, The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal, (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1983) p.4.

7. Ali, n.5, p.185

8. Roy, n.6, p.4

9. A K Nazmul Karim, The Dynamics of Bengladesh Society, (Vikas Publishing House Private Limited, 1980) p.ix.

distinctly "Indic". Well into the 19th century there persisted a syncretism in popular Bengali practice of both Hinduism and Islam.¹⁰

In the 19th century started a campaign of Islamization of Muslims of Bengali origin, by rejecting all that was thought to be "Bengali" in the life of a Muslim as something incompatible to the ideals and principles of Islam. The preachers' notion of Islamic society was based on vague conception of Islamic society of Middle Eastern values. The very nature of their propaganda which emphasised on distinctive ethos of Islam, created great misgivings about the Muslim population about their association with Bengal. The new emphasis was on differentiating popular Islam in Bengal from the local cultural traditions, much of which were associated and closely identified with Hinduism and polytheism and therefore as anti-Islamic.¹¹

This Pan-Islamism with its emphasis on the larger world of Islam implied trans-Indian identity. The fervour was not confined merely to the theoretical exposition of the higher Ulema. The literature produced by the mullahs during the period is replete with ideas of Islamic culture strikingly alien to the local modes of life and based on a vision of "Islamic World" of the Middle East.¹² This anti-local cultural stance of the

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10. Peter J. Bertocci, "Bangladesh : Composite Cultural Identify and Modernisation in a Muslim Majority State", in n.4, p.75
11. Rafiuddin Ahmed, The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 : A Quest for Identity, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1981) p.106.
12. *ibid*, p.107-108

orthodoxy was further reinforced by the ashraf who refused to integrate with the Bengali life and tried hard to protect their Urdu-based culture as the "correct" way of life. These Ashrafs were the Muslims who considered themselves "superior" to the mass Muslim population, or ajlafs as they were called, and thought themselves as direct descendents of the Muslim conquerors of the Middle East. They kept their distinctness and refused to compromise with any of the local ways of life and even the language spoken by the masses.¹³

The Muslim middle-class insistence on an exclusive Islamic identity was intensified in the late 19th century. During this first phase of British rule the economy of Bengal suffered serious reverses and this affected the Muslims more adversely than Hindus.¹⁴ In the wake of economic competition and political rivalry against the Hindu bhadralok along with inadequate economic opportunities and increasing hostility of Hindu extremists the educated Muslims were convinced about their separatist stance which pushed them into the camp of the upper ashraf.¹⁵

This bhadralok society or the elites of Bengal were a product of English education and can be considered as torch

13. Ahmed, Rafiuddin, n.11 pp. 106-141

14. Ramkrishna Mukherjee, "Nation Building in Bangladesh" in Rajni Kothari ed., State and Nation Building a Third World Perspective, (Centre for Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1976) p.290

15. Ahmed, n.11, p.110

bearers of Bengal renaissance. Unfortunately the Muslims because of their orthodoxy, stayed away from English education and hence could not reap its benefits. This was also one of the reasons for growing economic disparity between the Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. Conservative Muslim thinkers even thought that the Hindu elites joined hands with the British to exploit the poor Muslims of Bengal.¹⁶

The masses as a result of Islamization were made to feel that as Muslims they were different from their Hindu neighbours. Bengal to them became a non-Muslim land. The Hindu Bengalis were now regarded as "Bengalis" while the Muslim Bengalis being only Muslims. The idea of separateness from Hindu neighbours was seen in personal names which also underwent total Islamization. This way Islamization of even one's personal identity raised a basic question : whether it was possible to be a Muslim and a Bengali at the same time. The answer was in negative. This was a deliberate attempt made by the Muslim missionaries since they felt that the process of Bengalization of Islam if not prevented, would make Bengali Islam even more remote from mainstream Islam.¹⁷

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16. For details see Sufia Ahmed, Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912, (Bangladesh, Oxford University Press, 1974)
17. Zillur R Khan, "Islam and Bengali Nationalism", Asian Survey, (Volume 25 no.8 August 1985) p.835

The 19th century also saw Bengal renaissance. Though it was mainly Hindu in composition, it brought out the "Bengali" distinctiveness of the culture which was typical to this part of the sub-continent despite religious difference.

Thus despite attempts of Islamization Bengali Muslims in the 19th and early 20th century seem to have been bearers of a composite cultural identity uniting both "Muslimness" and "Bengaliness". Their adherence to Islam is apparent but at the same time their pride in their language and local culture and certain social customs considered to be un-Islamic by the orthodoxy which they held in common with non-Muslims, were equally apparent.¹⁸

The movement for Pakistan was a political movement of the Muslim community in India for establishment of a separate homeland for Muslims where they would be free from the Hindu politico-economic domination and further their own cultural and politico-economic interests. In this sense the movement for Pakistan was more a Muslim nationalist movement than an Islamic religious movement.¹⁹ The Muslims of Bengal, in particular, supported the Pakistan movement not for its religious contents. For the Bengali Muslim masses who supported the creation of Pakistan, politicisation began with the preparation for the 1935 election which was dominated by Fazlul Haq's call for the politics

18. Bertocci, n.10, p.76

19. Ahmed, n.1, p.138

of dal bhat i.e., politics for the economic emancipation of the masses.^{19a} For the masses Pakistan meant liberation from Hindu Zamindars. When the 1905 Partition of Bengal was annulled, the Muslim community for the same reason had felt betrayed since they thought that once again the Hindus and the British had aligned together against their interests.^{19b}

But separation from "Hindu" India did not give the Muslims of Bengal politico-economic and cultural liberation and disillusion-ment awaited them just round the corner.

The structural problems of Pakistan was enlarged due to failure of the political system to accommodate all sectional interests. This was compounded since the leadership that emerged was not quite astute, or more important, representative of various sections of the entire population. The class origin of the Muslim League leadership was elitist comprising of Zamindars of Muslim minority states of UP and Bihar. With this class and regional bias in the composition of the Muslim League, it was quite natural that they were soon left in the cold. The Bengali Muslims soon realised that West Pakistanis and Muslim refugees from North and Central India had replaced the Hindus as wielders of economic and political power. Bengali nationalism thus challenged the Muslims

19a. Shamali Ghosh, "Fazlul Haq & Muslim Politics in Pre-Partition in Bengal", International Studies, (vol.13 no.3 July 1974) pp 441-464

19b. For details see Shila Sen, Muslim Politics in Bengal, (New Delhi, Impex, 1976)

of West Pakistan. For the time being the Ummah was submerged by the regional and linguistic nationalism of Bengali Muslims.²⁰

Bengali Muslim identity of the 19th and early 20th centuries changed into Bengali nationalism in the middle of the present century essentially due to two major factors. First, was Jinnah's decision to adopt Urdu as the national language which was opposed by the Bengalis vehemently leading to loss of lives of a few Bengali students and others. The second was the decision of the central government of Pakistan to nullify the results of the provincial Assembly elections in 1954 in which the Muslim League had been routed in East Pakistan.²¹

The new ruling class of Pakistan realised that in order to control the democratic Bengali masses, they had to be assimilated as much as possible into Pakistan. Their ideology and distinctness as Bengali had to be merged into the new concept of being Pakistanis. In order to bring about such homogeneity from above, it was necessary that Bengali should be replaced by a common language for the entire country. This had to be Urdu. The people of Bengal had to be sealed from their old associates and long association with Hindus had to be erased. Thus in order to hold two separate wings of Pakistan together, there emerged a policy of one language, one culture.²²

 20. Md. Ayoob and K Subramaniam ed., The Liberation War p.2-6

21. Khan, n.16, p.842-843

22. Subrata Banerjee, Bangladesh, (New Delhi, National Book Trust, 1981) p.49

The 1951 census showed that in Pakistan Bengali was spoken by 54.6% of the population while Urdu was spoken by only 5%. The attempted assimilation by the central government into the supposedly monolithic Pakistan created a realisation among a group of intellectuals that language had an important role to play in cultural self-determination and language thus emerged as a symbol of identity.

The Bengali Muslim intelligensia came from comparatively poor and lower middle class families of rural background. The students who led the language movement were from these families. Apart from challenging their basic identity, the imposition of Urdu posed a serious economic problem for them as non-Urdu speaking students would stand at a distinct disadvantage in government employment.^{22a}

The people of East Bengal gradually started realising that the real motive of the central government of Pakistan was to destroy the distinct cultural identity of the Bengalis. Thus it became evident to them that the acceptance of Bengali as the state language was essential to ensure cultural self-determination. The Bengali Muslims realised that there was a distinction between Islam as a religion and Islam as a political force. As Badruddin

 22a. For details see S K Chakrabarti, Evolution of Politics in Bangladesh 1974-1978, (New Delhi, Associate Publishing House, 1978)

Umar puts it, the artificial contradictions between being a Bengali and a Muslim became untenable.²³

The Central government leaders in order to ensure unity and consensus in the Islamic Ummah took recourse to a strategy of Islamising the Bengali language. In order to do so, they proposed to replace Bengali script with Arabic. This further alienated the Bengali students and intelligentsia.²⁴

A turning point really came after the martyrdom of young students on 21st February 1952. The Language Movement now really spread to the masses and they realised that their mother-tongue was an integral part of their existence. Widespread support of the movement from the rural areas started coming because of the unbroken roots of the villages of the urban middle class.

Therefore it might not be any exaggeration to say that the freedom struggle of Bangladesh actually originated from the Bengali language movement as the basic inspiration of the freedom struggle of the Bengali speaking people of Pakistan came mainly from linguistic nationalism. Although after 21st February 1952, the Central government of Pakistan had agreed to accord Bengali equal status with Urdu and grant it the status of a national language, it did not convince the Bengali Muslims because of the

 23. Badruddin Umar, Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolan O Tatkalin Rajniti (Bengali), (Calcutta, Anandadhara Prakashan, 1970)

24. For details see Chakrabarti, n 22a, pp 36-67

untrustworthy and discriminatory decisions taken earlier by the Pakistani political elite.

What the Language Movement actually did was that it laid the foundation of a new cultural life of the people which was truly non-communal and democratic. Muslims of Bengal during the British rule, when they followed communal politics had almost forgotten their national identity. Through the shedding of martyrs' blood on 21st February, 1952, Bengalis began to discover their national identity and their social, cultural and political life began to strike roots in the soil of East Bengal.²⁵

The Language Movement brought a new consciousness among the younger generation of East Bengal -

Unlike the older generation of Muslims who lived in an abstract world - these young people have found concrete and solid ground under their feet. They love their native lands - its clouds and sunshine, its air and water, its language and literature, its music and dance, its society and people. They are really at home in their native land. The older generation Muslims denied everything they received from the soil. They liked to feel that their forefathers had all migrated from Arabia or some other Muslim countries of West Asia, that they had come here as conqueror and never felt at home in Bengal. Religion for them was an escape from reality and the environment in which they lived.²⁶

The educated middle-class who gave the leadership to the language movement were from this new generation of Bengalis who were proud of their culture and language and knew that to part

25. Badruddin Umar, "Lessons of February 21" in Politics and Society in East Bengal, (Dhaka,)pp 108-109.
26. Kamruddin Ahmed, A Socio-political History of Bengal and the Birth of Bangladesh, (Dhaka, Inside Library, 1975) p.194

with it would mean national suicide. As a result, the importance of religion diminished and the cultural, economic and political questions came to the forefront.²⁷

One of the important reasons why the Language Movement was successful was that during the movement the people maintained good relations amongst themselves and did not allow any anti-people tension to develop despite provocations from the government. Often attempts were made by the authorities to flare up communal and linguistic riots but the people remained unmoved in the face of such propaganda and put up an united resistance.²⁸ This was possible partly because of the untiring campaign by the political workers against the government and also because the people realised that the language issue was not merely an educational and cultural issue, but it affected the interests of the common people belonging to different religions. Thus the unity and solidarity of the people that was forged during the struggle became the principal source of strength of the movement and it led to the surrender of the Central Government of Pakistan on the Language question. Thus it was indeed a landmark in the growth of the feeling of a broad based nationalism among the Bengalis.

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The 1954 General Elections was another important landmark in the growth of Bengali nationalism. The major

27. Chakraborty, n.22a, p.61

28. Umar, n. 25, p.109

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opposition parties of East Pakistan formed an United Front on the basis of 21 Point Programme to fight the Muslim League. The election manifesto laid stress on the Language Movement and Bengali nationalism.²⁹ The United Front registered an overwhelming victory and formed a government in East Pakistan. In 1956 Bengali was atleast given status of a state language.

Economic policy of the central government was also a factor that gave momentum to Bengali nationalism already kindled by the adverse cultural policy of the central government. It turned out to be a case of internal colonialism where resource allocation to East Pakistan was very meagre compared to West Pakistan. Moreover the central government did not take any initiative to build infra-structures or industries or control floods which are very devastating in this part of the sub-continent. The inter-regional and foreign trade resulted in transfer of capital from East to West wing.³⁰

After Field Marshal Ayub Khan took over power as a result of a coup in 1958, Islamization continued on a different plane. Songs of Tagore were banned because of its secular overtones. Public dancing was regarded as un-Islamic and Ayub put a stop to it. These touched the hearts of the people of East Pakistan very closely. Ayub often raised the slogan of "Islam in

29. For details see Rafiqul Islam, "The Language Movement" in n.1 pp.154-155

30. For details see n.24

danger" in order to use obscurantism to foment communalism and anti-India propaganda to consolidate his position.

Ayub, to consolidate his power, announced Presidential elections. Miss Fatemah Jinnah contested the polls against him. On 26th September 1964, twenty three prominent theologians issued a statement in Karachi that no woman could become the head of the state in accordance to Islamic law. This propaganda had little effect in East Pakistan.³¹ However, Miss Jinnah did not get an overwhelming majority in East Pakistan which observers had expected. The reason behind it were that being neglected by the provincial government they preferred a strong President. Furthermore Ayub had created a strong feeling that they could expect a better deal from a strong government.³²

The Hazratbal incident i.e., theft of the sacred relic of the Prophet, was used by the Pakistani government to whip up communal feelings in East Pakistan. Even after the recovery of the Relic the Pakistan Press and Radio called it a fraud and continued whipping up communal frenzy that had ready targets among thousands of non-Muslims in East Pakistan. Ayub thought that large scale exodus of non-Muslims from East Pakistan would help the regime in building population parity in both the wings. However the role played by the Bengali Muslim intelligensia in

31. Jayanta K Ray, Demoncracy and Nationalism on Trial - A study of East Pakistan, (Simla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1968), p. 308
32. Iftikhar Ahmed, Pakistan General Election 1970, (Lahore, South Asian Institute, Punjab University), p.31

checking the holocaust that could have followed, was indeed very inspiring.³³

During the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 the East Bengalis found themselves completely defenseless at the time of a national emergency. This evoked a feeling among them that their economic and political interests were of no value to the central government and they were being sacrificed for Kashmir, which was a faraway place for them. Thus Ayub's slogan of "Islam in danger" proved meaningless for them. The war also brought Indo-Pakistan trade to a standstill which hurt the East Pakistanis more than the West Pakistanis. This added up to the disillusionment and disenchantment of the East Bengalis for the central government of Pakistan. The Indo-Pakistan crisis thus reinforced Bengali's demand for autonomy. The Tashkent Declaration which followed was used by the opposition against Ayub for his softness and was regarded as his diplomatic defeat. The main opposition party in East Pakistan the Awami League used this critical situation to put forward its demand for autonomy through the 6-Point Programme which epitomised not religious, but the political, economic and security demands of the people of East Pakistan.³⁴

33. Ray, n. 31, p. 273

34. For details see Herbert Feldman, From Crisis to Crisis (Oxford University Press, 1972) pp.156, 178-180.

The Six Point Programme include -

- (1) The Constitution of Pakistan must be federal with a parliamentary government and the legislature directly elected on the basis of adult franchise.

The Islamic emphasis in the constitution was enlarged under Ayub Khan. The fundamental rights and power of litigation all had a distinct Islamic fervour without mentioning the word. The constitution also declared Pakistan to be an Islamic state.³⁵

With the re-imposition of Martial law in 1970 after Yahya Khan came into power emphasis on Islam increased. Dr Falzalur Rahman's book on "Islam" was banned.³⁶

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- (2) Federal subjects to be limited to defence and foreign affairs
 - (3) There should be (i) separate currencies for the two wings freely convertible to each other; (ii) in the alternative, one currency subject to statutory safeguards against flight of capital from East to West Wing.
 - (4) Power of taxation and revenue collection to be vested to the federating units; the centre to be financed by the allocation of share in state taxes.
 - (5) Separate foreign exchange accounts to be kept for East and West Pakistan, the requirement of the federal government to be met by the two wings in proportion or in any other fixed basis as may be agreed upon.
 - (6) Setting up of a militia or a para-military force in East Pakistan, self-sufficiency of East Pakistan in defence matters, an ordinance factory and a military academy to be set up in the Eastern Wing, the federal naval HQ to be in East Pakistan.

in Jyoti Sengupta, History of Freedom Movement, (Calcutta, Naya Prakashan, 1974) p.187

35. For details see Afzal Iqbal, Islamisation of Pakistan, (Delhi, Vishal Printers, 1984) pp.75-83

36. Herbert Feldman, The End and the Beginning, (London, Oxford University Press, 1975) p.46

In the elections of 1970 the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman swept the polls in East Pakistan. It fought on the basis of the Six-Point Programme which did not have any religious underpinning. But its manifesto was secular only so far as the religion practiced by the vast majority was not violated. The manifesto thus made a cautious statement when it said that no laws repugnant to Islamic Principles would be enacted.³⁷ Earlier in the Round Table Conference Mujib did not ask for withdrawal of Islamic principles in the constitution.³⁸ However, the low key use of religion by the mainstream political movements proved the primacy of politico-economic issues.³⁹

The students, who were very active in the political process especially during the Anti-Ayub Movement showed their preference for economic emancipation rather than religious ones. The All Party Action Committee (APAC) formed during this time had a predominance of parties oriented to left politics. For this reason economic and political demands gained primacy. The 11-Point Programme chalked out by the students during this time included Mujib's 6-Point Programme and other secular principles.

 37. Shyamali Ghosh, The East Pakistan Awami League 1958-71, Ph.D (Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of International Studies, 1980) p.406.

38. For details see Feldman, n. 36, pp.117-119

39. Mahfuzul Haque Chowdhury, "Nationalism, Religion and Politics in Bangladesh" in Rafiuddin Ahmed ed., Bangladesh Society Religion and Politics, (Chittagong, Bangladesh, South Asia Studies Group, 1985) p.66

These students came mostly from rural areas as a result their demands got support of the masses.⁴⁰

During the Bangladesh war for those who fought for liberation religion was a non-issue. Rather the fundamentalist group led by Jamaat-i-Islami and others had opposed it and fought tooth and nail to prevent its birth. The Pakistani military junta raised para-military forces like the Al-Badr and Al-Shams from the ranks of these fundamentalists.

Thus, during the autonomy and the anti-Ayub movement religion was a non-issue and Islamization attempted till liberation did not make any impact on the people who gave primacy to politico-economic and indigenous cultural issues.

40. Paul Brass and Marcus Franda ed., Radical Politics in South Asia (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1973)

CHAPTER III

ISLAMIZATION IN BANGLADESH

MUJIB TO ERSHAD

C H A P T E R I I I

ISLAMIZATION IN BANGLADESH : MUJIB TO ERSHAD

After decades of suppression in the hands of the West Pakistanis, Bangladesh was born in 1971 as a result of a blood bath. It was the first country to emerge as a result of a successful national liberation movement against what may be called "internal colonialism" in the new states. In this bloody war Hindus and Muslims fought hand in hand against the Pakistani occupation force and religious parochialism was subdued in the fight for self-determination of the Bengalis against the autocratic and authoritarian rule of west Pakistan.

The geographical separation of the two wings of Pakistan and the magnitude of cultural and linguistic differences between them, coupled with the conduct and attitudes of the governing elite of the Central government made it extremely difficult for East Pakistan to continue in the union. The economic exploitation, political suppression and cultural infiltration were all directed in making East Pakistan a colony. The only force that bound the two wings of Pakistan together was "Islamic Unity". But with the passage of time this bond seemed extremely fragile.

When in 1947 the sub-continent was partitioned on the basis of religion the people of East Bengal supported the demand for Pakistan more vigorously than the Muslims of West Pakistan since in the partition they saw their economic emancipation from the clusters of the landlords who happened to be mostly Hindus. But their being Muslims never conflicted with Bengali language and culture. Separation from Pakistan on the basis of Bengali nationalism, however, did not make it easier for the people of Bangladesh for identity building, and search for an identity began soon after its separation from Pakistan.¹

During the liberation movement the issue of religion never came to the foreground and Hindus and Muslims fought hand in hand for a common cause. Some observers feel that it was a part of Awami League's strategy to win support of the radical groups as well as the Hindus.² This strategy, however, would not have worked if the people did not accept it.

One of the dilemmas faced by Bangladesh immediately after independence is the degree to which Islam would be given formal expression in the legal foundation of the new state. The Awami League government of Mujib was from the beginning determined

1. M. Rashiduzzaman, "Changing Political Patterns in Bangladesh - Internal Constraints and External Fears" Asian Survey, (vol. vxii no. 9 September 1977) pp 793-808
2. Kirsten Westergaard, State and Rural Society in Bangladesh : A Study of Relationships, (Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, Monograph Series No. 49, Curzon Press 1985) p.91

to exclude religious consideration from the country's constitution and to prohibit political activity of several religious groups. This was because these religious political parties did not support the liberation movement of erstwhile East Pakistan and even aligned with the Pakistan occupation force to sabotage the movement.

The 1972 constitution proclaimed secularism as one of the four principles of state policy, disallowing state favour for any particular religious community, explicitly prohibiting political action by religious organisations, and banning political parties bearing Islamic bias.³

The Part I of the Constitution framed in 1972 dealt with national language and other national symbols of the new state. Article 3, of the constitution declared that Bengali would be the only state language of the country. Amar Sonar Bangla a song written and composed by Rabindranath Tagore was made the national anthem. The song was un-Islamic in the orthodox sense since it pictured the country as "mother" which is generally regarded as an un-Islamic concept. Article 4 described the national flag which had a rising sun instead of an Islamic symbol of moon. The

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3. Peter J. Bertocci, "Bangladesh : Composite Cultural Identity and Modernisation in a Muslim Majority State" in Philip H Stoddard, David C Cuthell, Margaret W Sullivan ed., Change and the Muslim World, (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1981) p.77

citizens of the new state were known as "Bangalees" an identity for which the people of East Pakistan had fought for.⁴

After coming to power, Sheikh Mujib in order to highlight his secular ideas discontinued religious neutrality of the media as was practiced between 16th December 1971 to the day Sheikh Mujib returned to Bangladesh under the guidance of some secular minded intellectuals of the Dhaka University. Mujib adopted a policy of giving equal opportunity to all religions and ordered citations from holy books of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity at the start of the broadcast of the state radio and television.⁵

Reasons for this early emphasis on secularism were several. Firstly, the raison d'etre of the new state was Bengali nationalism and the liberation struggle had highlighted the Bengali element in the people's identity while de-emphasising the Muslim content. Secondly, Bangladesh retained a large number of non-Muslims (about 20%) and by following a state policy of neutrality in religious matters the government hoped to minimise religious and communal conflicts, a well-known phenomenon in South Asian

4. Moudud Ahmed, Bangladesh : Era of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, (Dhaka, University Press Limited, 1983) pp. 93-94
5. Talukdar Maniruzzaman, "Bangladesh Politics : Secular and Islamic trends" in S R Chakraborty, Virendra Narain (ed) Bangladesh Volume 1 - History and Culture (New Delhi, South Asian Publishers, 1986) pp 49-50.

politics. Finally, the Islamic parties were opposed to the liberation war. That they should be banned and Islam be neutralised as the basis of law and politics was quite understandable in the initial years of Bangladesh's national life.⁶

Sheikh Mujib himself said in the Constituent Assembly defending his secularist ideas :

"Secularism does not mean absence of religion. The 75 million people of Bengal will have the right to religion. We do not want to ban religion by law. We have no intention of that kind. Secularism does not mean absence of any religion. Muslims will observe their religion and nobody in the state will have the power to prevent that. Hindus will observe their religion and nobody has the power to prevent that. Buddhists and Christians will observe their respective religions and nobody can prevent that. Our only objection is that nobody will be allowed to use religion as a political weapon".⁷

But very soon mounting pressure from both within and outside the state forced Mujib to change his stand on religion.

By mid 1973 although a vast number of countries had recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign state it was still unable to get admission in the United Nation because of the veto power

6. n.3 pp. 77-78

7. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Mujib's speech in Bangladesh Constituent Assembly on 4.11.72 in n.5 p.50

exercised by People's Republic of China which along with Pakistan and several rightist Islamic state did not recognise Bangladesh.⁸

One of the biggest obstacle in Pakistan's recognition of Bangladesh was the 90 thousand Prisoners of War (POW) held in Indian camps. At the beginning the Awami League government took a strong stand on the POWs. For international prestige and economic compulsions Bangladesh's entry into the United Nations was indeed demanding, and recognition by the Muslim World was important for the flow of aid which was much needed to build up a war-torn economy of Bangladesh. The World Islamic Summit was due in Lahore (1974) and Bhutto invited Mujib to attend the Summit with a subtle understanding that the case of POWs would be dropped.⁹ With the formal recognition by Pakistan, Bangladesh's entry into the United Nations became simpler. Moreover, the orthodox states of the Gulf now recognised Bangladesh and started giving economic aid. While the main objection of Mujib's attendance to the Summit was political, some observers believe that appeasement of fundamentalist elements was also served.

Because of its legacy of internal colonialism and its war-ravaged birth, Bangladesh faced acute economic problems since its very inception. During the initial years India was the major aid giver. But slowly people of Bangladesh felt that India was

8. Ahmed, n.4, p.165

9. For details see ibid p.203

bent upon keeping the newly born state in its neighbourhood as its client for which it started being blamed for the growing misery of Bangladesh.¹⁰ Even after the withdrawal of Indian troops the strong influence of Indian government persisted in Bangladesh. As events developed, Bangladesh sought its identity through its opposition to Indian influence and predominance. While officially Bangladesh remained a secular state, Islamic identity was continuously stressed among the public. Islamic identity became the centre of resistance against Indian predominance in Bangladesh politics. It also became a source of strength for the opposition against Sheikh Mujib's government. There were reports of communal violence in the fall of 1972 in several parts of Bangladesh during Hindu religious festivals. In 1973 the so called Muslim Bengal movement was started by the right wing Islamic forces to revive Islamic sentiments and to resist the secularism propounded by the ruling Awami League.¹¹

According to Raunaq Jahan, widespread sympathy for Islamic identity of Bangladesh was growing slowly among the elites and the masses of rural Bengal. Such campaign was launched in a clandestine manner among teachers, students, civil servants and politicians in shape of whispering campaign against India which was thought to be the root cause of all the misery. This was

10. For details see *ibid* pp. 181 to 192

11. Rashiduzzaman, n.1 p.797

because all the religious right wing parties were banned and therefore they did not have any open platform to propagate their ideas. These anti-Indian forces found growing support for increasing public frustration caused by spiralling inflation, food shortage and corruption in the government.¹²

Notwithstanding the strengthening of the religious right wing parties during this time it was the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) that emerged as the strongest challenge to the Awami League regime. The party was composed of dissident and radical factions of Awami League's own student and labour fronts i.e., the Rab-Siraj faction of the Students League and the Sirajul Alam Khan faction of Sramik League. This party was secular in its stand. Its major plank was scientific socialism. Its major attack against the Awami League government was focussed on corruption.¹³

The stagnant economic situation of the contry which even further deteriorated because of floods and famine in 1974 pushed Mujib's opposition further into the camp of religious elements. "Mujibism" as it was called comprising of Nationalism, Socialism, Secularism and Democracy, proved insufficient to attract aid from the Muslim World.¹⁴

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12. Raunaq Jahan, Bangladesh Politics : Problems and Issues, (University Press Limited, Dhaka 1980) pp. 71-72
 13. Rashiduzzaman, n.2 p.798
 14. Zillur Rahman Khan, "Islam and Bengali Nationalism" Asian Survey, (vol. 25, no. 8, August, 1985) p.848

As the economic situation of the country started deteriorating further, Mujib turned to the Arab countries in hope of getting substantial economic aid and recognition by Pakistan in the year during Mujib's attendance in the Islamic summit proved useful in this regard as some observers have commented.

A world-wide resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, coupled with discovery of immense oil wealth had its repercussions on Bangladesh. In a country with such a vast population of Muslims where Islam as a religious faith is deep rooted, it is almost impossible to ignore the religious sentiments of the people. Bangladesh turned to the Islamic world in response to the pressure exerted both internally and globally by the changes in the ideological environment and its own economic needs.

Immediately after the coup of 1975 the young military rebels of Bangladesh led by Col. Rashid and Col. Farukh declared Bangladesh to be an Islamic Republic. These two coup leaders were orthodox minded Muslims who believed that British and Brahmanic conspiracy in the 19th century had destroyed Muslim civilisation in this part of the sub-continent by destroying them not only economically but also their culture and language.¹⁵ Later when Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmed came to power, he withdrew this

 15. For details see Col. Rashid and col. Farukh, Muktir Path, (Bengali), (Dhaka, Publisher Sayed Aatur Rahman, 1984), pp.38-40

announcement. But the question of Islamic identity remained alive.

When Zia-ur-Rahman took over office he took certain positive steps to bring about Islamization in the country by amending the constitution. The constitution was amended to delete the word "secularism" which was replaced by "Absolute Trust and Faith in Almighty Allah". He also inserted Bismillah-ar Rahman-ar Rahim (in the name of Allah the Beneficent the Merciful). In addition the following sentence was added.

"The state shall endeavour to consolidate preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity".¹⁶

(A new clause was added to Article 25).

Though Zia did try to create and capitalise on the Islamic fervour, he did not go as far as the Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq who aimed to introduce a true "Islamic System" in Pakistan encompassing Islamic polity, economy and society. Zia-ur Rahman was not very specific when he talked about Islamic ideals

16. It should be noted that the changes were made not through a proper constitutional manner. These were first promulgated as Martial Law Ordinances and then incorporated into an amendment passed by the constitution where Zia's party was in a overwhelming majority.

Westergaard, n.3 p.92 see also - Shyamali Ghosh, "Constitutional Changes in Bangladesh : Process of Political Development" Indian Quarterly (New Delhi), (vol. xiii no. 4, Oct-Dec. 1986, pp.399-400, Hussain, Sayeed Anwar, "Bangladesh and Organisation of Islamic Conference", Asian Affairs, (Bangladesh), April-June 1987 p.26, Ahmed Emajuddin, "Current Trends of Islam in Bangladesh", Economic and Political Weekly, (Bombay), vol. 13 no. 3, (18th June 1983), p. 1114

and undertook some symbolic measures. He manipulated symbols intelligently to recruit support of the Islamists. He emphasised Islamic symbols and slogans in public meetings and appearances. For example he used to start his public speeches with the Islamic greetings "Bismillah-ar Rahman-ar Rahim" and end up his speeches with "Khuda Hafiz" and "Bangladesh Zindabad". Under Zia Bangladesh became an influential member of Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and strengthened its position as a Muslim nation.

Bangladesh in pursuance of her foreign policy objectives and securing support of the fundamentalist elements residing within the country, developed close ties with OIC. The country has secured membership in the 5 major special committees. In her commitments to the cause of the Islamic Ummah Bangladesh became the co-founder of Islamic Development Bank (IDB) 1975. Finally, the choice of Dhaka as the venue of 14th Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference (in 1983) and successful holding of the same under most difficult circumstances earned for Bangladesh the reputation of a most dynamic partner of Islamic Ummah.¹⁷

These moves by Zia cannot be solely attributed to economic reasons, that is to draw more aid from Arab countries. It also had domestic reasons. For gaining mass support and the much needed legitimacy he had built up an ideology around

17. Sayed Anwar Hussain, "Bangladesh and Organisation of Islamic Conference" Asian Affairs (Bangladesh, vol. 9 no. 2, April-June 1987) pp. 18-19

"Bangladeshi nationalism". "He justified the emergence and continuity of Bangladesh as an expression of Bengali Muslim and Muslim-Bengali identity".¹⁸

Zia also adopted certain symbolic measures like hanging of posters in Government offices with quotations from the Holy Koran, flying of Eid-Mobarak festoons with the national flag etc. At the administrative level too certain changes were made. A new Division of Religious Affairs under a full-fledged Minister was created, Islamic Academy was expanded. Several non-governmental organisations and institutions were opened to teach students the Islamic traditions. The Islamic institutions and socio-religious organisations were engaged in preaching Islam and teaching Islamic principles in societal level, having practically the same objectives in view, i.e., making Bangladesh an Islamic state. These parties grew in strength and number when in 1976 the government removed the ban on these parties, which were previously imposed under Mujib's government.¹⁹

It is true that Zia did not wear secularism in his sleeves as Mujib used to wear and took certain positive steps towards Islamisation of society. At the same time he went out of

18. Shantimay Ray, "An Overview of the Dynamics of Bangladesh Politics", Kalim Bahadur ed., South Asia in Transition (New Delhi, Patriot Publishers) p.192
19. Emajuddin Ahmed, "Current Trends of Islam in Bangladesh", Economic and Political Weekly, (Bombay) (vol 18, no. 25, 18th June 1983) pp.1114-1116

his way to promote communal harmony. While addressing the Hindus he asked them to spread the message of "Bangladeshi nationalism" although he was quite vague about how precisely the Hindus might fit into the message²⁰ which had a religious undertone.

This "Islamic" image of Bangladesh which Zia posed paid off in international relations too. It brought ready support for the country's disputes with India. For example in the Farakka Water dispute and the dispute over New Moore Islands over Bay of Bengal Pakistan and other conservative Islamic countries supported Bangladesh's stand. But these were not to the extent of being anti-Indian. The support was quite guarded.

The activities of the Islam-pasand elements in Bangladesh increased ever since Ershad came to power. As soon as he came to power in the middle of 1982, Arabic and introduction of religious instruction at all stages of education was given prominence. This was designed clearly to get Saudi Arabian support to prove it to the mass of common Muslims that the government "was out to uphold the banner of Islam and take the wind out of Islamic political parties".²¹ The details of the attempts and resistance that followed will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. It is sufficient for here to say that the movement nearly toppled the regime.

20. Marcus Franda, "Zia-ur-Rahman and Bangladesh Nationalism Economic and Political Weekly (Bombay) (vol 11, no. 25, Annual 1981) p.377

21. Ray, n.19, p.193

By the middle of 1983 Ershad realised that in order to stay in power he had to obtain a stamp of legitimacy and what could be a better option than posing himself as the defender of Islam? He also declared that Bangladesh will not survive unless it goes all out to set up Islamic Law Administration". In a special reference to Islam General Ershad further declared that, "we the nine crores Muslims will certainly speak about Islam, think about Islam and dream about Islam. That is our only way to emancipation".²² He has also listed some steps taken towards Islamization which included declaration of Fridays as holidays, setting up of Zakat fund etc. In order to win support of the Imams he granted monthly stipends, free water and electricity to mosques, exempting mosques from payment of municipal taxes etc. An Islamic foundation, a semi-governmental organisation has been set up in Dhaka which is funded by Islamic Solidarity fund of OIC. The activities of this foundation include training and upgrading of Imams and Khatibs, subsidising original work on Islam in Bangali.²³

Bangladesh is heavily dependent on economic aid for its survival. The inflow of financial assistance from Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Libya and Iran lent encouragement to the resurgence of Islam. But whether there has been indeed any

22. R G Sawhney, "Winds of Change in Bangladesh", National Herald, (New Delhi), 4th September 1989

23. ibid

increase in percentage of aid flow from the Gulf countries is indeed very disputable. Non-residents Bangladeshis, however, working in these Gulf countries have added to the inflow of foreign capital. A detailed table showing number of Bangladeshis working abroad is given at the end of the chapter. The table clearly illustrates that the number of non-resident Bangladeshis is quite large and their income therefore is quite lumpsum.

Since he came to power in most public meetings and officials speeches, Ershad pointed out his efforts to uphold the cause of Islam. He insisted that Islam is the religion of peace and harped on the issue that, "if we can firmly follow the trends of Islam in our every day life we shall surely be able to establish peace and discipline in the society".²⁴

Bangladesh faces the challenge dealing with rapidly growing population. The national Family Planning Programme published promotional booklet on Islam and family planning and supported seminars/workshops with the religious leaders. However, these activities are urban based and hardly benefit the grass-root level population who are mostly rural and illiterate and are subject to misinterpretation and incorrect information.^{24a}

 24. Hussain Mohammad Ershad, Bangladesh Observer, (Dhaka), 18th March 1985

24a. For details see Fatema Alauddin, "Promotion of Small Family Norm in Context of Islam : Experience of Bangladesh" in K K Pathak, P S Bhatia and M K Premi ed., Population Transition in South Asia, (New Delhi, Indian Association for Study of Population, 1989) pp.9-16

By adopting the Eighth Amendment (1988) in the Parliament, Ershad has made Islam the State religion of Bangladesh. Details of the Bill and the arguments put forward by the government and the protest movement that followed will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

By playing on religious sentiments in order to contain democratic pressures, military rulers all over the world have resorted to this time-tested instrument. On 24th March 1988, as Ershad stepped into seventh year of his rule, the biggest challenge before him was how to perpetuate and legitimise his hegemony. All his attempts to Islamise the polity should be seen from this light.²⁵

By this move to declare Islam to be the state religion of Bangladesh President Ershad hoped to split the opposition, which had virtually united on one point programme of his removal. But at the same time his action and measures have set the state towards fundamentalism which might upset the precarious balance between religion and politics which is held by Bangladesh since ages and has withstood frequent changes of political power in that country.²⁶

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25. Jai Prakash Sharma, "Ershad's Survival Tactics Threaten Sub-continent", The Patriot, (New Delhi) 24th September 1988
26. Abha Dixit, "Islamisation of Bangladesh", Mainstream, (New Delhi), (vol. 26 no. 48 10th September 1988), p.21

Government spokesman have stoutly defended the proposed move by saying that inserting the word "Islamic" in the constitution does not come in the way of secularism as other religions could also be freely practiced in Bangladesh. They pointed out that since long back in history religions and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh have been living in perfect communal harmony and peace, the latest moves towards Islamisation would not curtail their religious freedom.²⁷ By this move Ershad had claimed to have assumed equal rights for everyone and a society free from exploitation and blemishes.

The question that automatically arises is why was it necessary to take such a step to amend the Constitution which actually does not mean anything substantive? Observers feel that by pronouncing Bangladesh to be an Islamic Republic, Ershad tried to gain more economic support from the Islamic World especially Saudi Arabia. The "superficial dressing" of making Islam, the state religion was to lure more petro-dollars to Bangladesh on the rallying cry of Islamic fraternity. Political observers have rightly pointed out that Islamization attempts have been deliberately made to stop short of an Islamic society to gain the middle-ground among the fundamentalists. Unfortunately for Ershad the polarisation of Bangladesh politics had not allowed him to gain middle ground which Zia was able to gain. His Jatiya Party

27. *ibid*

exists largely as a result of institutional support of the army more than Zia's BNP. Domestically another great threat faced by Ershad is that the two opposition parties led by Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khalada Zia, though diametrically opposed to each other, have come together on a one point programme, to oust Ershad.²⁸

If one sees Ershad's Islamization policies, it is observed that it did not have the desired results on the Islamic political parties. The extreme right wing of Jamaat-i-Islami was unmoved and is of the opinion that the present regime is now exploiting religion to perpetuate its autocratic rule.²⁹ Similarly, the tactically Islamic ten party Oikya Front did not give up its opposition to General Ershad.³⁰

It will not be proper to wind up before mentioning the consequences which these Islamisation moves might have. Though it is true that these constitutional amendments did not give Islam enough ground to make itself visible in every aspect of life, but in the long run the constitution might be interpreted by Islam-pasand elements in that respect. The new education policy and other organisational activities of Islamic institutions might succeed in deep rooting orthodoxy in the minds of the people of

28. *ibid*

29. "Wooing the people through Religion", Hindu, (Madras) 8th April 1988

30. Ray, n.19, p.194

Bangladesh. Then if a party with fundamentalist background, comes to power, it might play with Islam at its own will. The advent of Freedom Party is an ominous sign in this regard. Col. Farukh, the leader of the party is an orthodox Muslim who played an active role in the assassination of Sheikh Mujib and his family. In the latest Presidential election (1988) Col. Farukh fought against Ershad and was able to win quite a few number of votes.

The next two chapters will deal with the reaction of the volatile people of Bangladesh against Ershad's Islamisation spree. One chapter will deal with extra constitutional protest movements against Islamisation and the other the constitutional form of registering one's opinion i.e., through elections.

T A B L E 1

DEPARTURE OF BANGLADESH NATIONALS ON EMPLOYMENT BY COUNTRY OF DESTINATION

COUNTRY	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1 9 8 9				1990 JAN.
						SEPT.	OCT	NOV	DEC	
U A E	8239	8681	9963	13437	15182	1326	1430	1271	1431	329
Qatar	4751	4847	5831	7309	8462	831	424	643	666	763
Kuwait	7283	10286	9559	6524	12402	1106	1447	1842	978	756
Iran	151	89	-	43	60	-	-	-	40	9
Iraq	5051	4908	3848	4192	2573	104	96	492	134	388
Saudi Arabia	37222	27335	39337	27703	39945	2676	3317	3249	4560	4853
Libya	1546	3111	2271	2759	1609	-	56	-	42	77
Bahrain	2969	2417	2055	3268	4830	412	408	138	615	514
Malaysia	792	530	-	209	160	-	-	-	12	-
Oman	9200	6255	440	2213	15429	1444	1737	1777	1814	1968
Ethiopia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jordan	31	4	-	10	28	-	14	-	1	8
Singapore	20	25	136	46	685	-	-	-	62	13
Lebanon & others	349	170	577	409	353	149	39	18	12	47
TOTAL	77694	68658	74017	68122	101718	8048	8968	9430	10367	9725

Source : BMET - From Monthly Statistical Bulletin of Bangladesh 1990 - Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh

CHAPTER IV

REACTIONS TO ISLAMIZATION I
(POPULAR MOVEMENTS)

C H A P T E R I V
REACTIONS TO ISLAMIZATION I
(POPULAR MOVEMENTS)

Promotion of an ideology has been described by Howard Wriggins as one of the strategies to be pursued by the rulers of the third world.¹ In traditional societies, religion happens to be a mass phenomena and politics, prerogative of the privileged few. In transitional societies religion and religious groups have often acted as channels for masses to become politicised. However, in these societies the effectiveness of religious organisations as agents of political socialisation depends on several factors : economic as well as political, such as urbanisation, means of communication, mass media, literacy and nature of suffrage.²

In political systems where there are free flow of political activities, Islamic ideology generally gets separated from mainstream politics; but where flow of politics is emaciated and where democratic institutions are weak and repressed by conservative regimes, religious activities gets mixed up with

1. Howard Wriggins, Rulers Imperitive, (Columbia University, Southern Asian Institute Series, Columbia Press, 1969)
2. Urmila Phadnis, Religion and Politics in Srilanka, (New Delhi, Manohar, 1976)

politics and tend to overflow the society. Islamic slogans are used not only by national liberation movements and progressive forces but also by conservative regimes.³

These not only become powerful weapons for the exploited classes in their pursuit for socio-economic liberation, but they also act as weapons for the privileged classes in their attempt to perpetuate the existing status-quo. In South Asia, Islamic slogans in most cases have strengthened the hands of the privileged classes. This is possible since in these states flow of political activities are feeble and democratic organisations and institutions are weak and fragmented.⁴

In Bangladesh despite there being religious organisations both political and a-political, Bengali nationalism has been the product of a long period of democratic struggle against an undemocratic regime in Pakistan. As its history proves, this struggle had been secular in nature without being vocal about it. The basis of nationalism, even if it is given the name "Bangladeshi" nationalism, remains unalterable. The fact that the Muslims of Bangladesh have been able to set a delicate balance between religion and politics and do not like to mix them

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3. A Vasilyev, "Islam in Present Day World", International Affairs, (Moscow) (vol. no. November 1981) pp.52-58
 4. Emajuddin Ahmed, "Current Trends of Islam in Bangladesh" Economic and Political Weekly, (vol. xviii no. 25, 18th June 1983) p.1114

up, has surfaced again and again. It would appear that to the vast majority of Muslims of Bangladesh religion is a private affair and they would like to keep it separate from their public life.

The regimes after Mujib have gradually tried to Islamise the society of Bangladesh. This was mainly due to economic reasons for getting the benefit of more aid from the Islamic Middle East and also in quest of legitimacy which these military regimes lacked.

It was Gen. Zia-ur-Rahman who started taking certain steps towards Islamisation during his tenure of five years in the government. Under him drastic steps like changing the constitution by deleting the word "secularism" and adding Bismillah-ar Rahman-ar Rahim (in the name of the Allah the Beneficent, the Merciful) was added as the opening sentence of the constitution and "Absolute Trust and Faith in Almighty Allah" was inserted. Moreover, a new Article 25, declaring the intention of the state of "stabilizing, preserving and strengthening the fraternal ties with the Muslim states on the basis of Islamic solidarity was added.⁵

5. For the full text of the Proclamation (Amendment) Order 19 see The Bangladesh Observer April 23, 1977; and also Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh as amended upto 28th February 1979

General H M Ershad as soon as he came to power started taking steps towards Islamisation. The proposed new Education Policy (1982) and Islamizing 21st February Celebrations (1983) and amending the constitution (1978) to make Islam the state religion of Bangladesh are a few of such attempts towards Islamisation. Gen. Ershad has perhaps thus behaved as a typical third world ruler trying to promote an ideology. Gen. Ershad came into power by replacing a duly constituted civilian government through a coup and has retained it through questionable election. So his motivation for Islamisation is largely for acquiring political legitimacy. What he has been trying to achieve is to establish direct linkages with the people bypassing the democratic institutions. This is a familiar style of functioning, introduced in the sub-continent by Gen. (later Field Martial) Ayub Khan. But support base and support structures cannot be built by imposing from above in politicised societies like Bangladesh. This would be demonstrated in the following analysis of the three instances of Islamisation efforts cited above. The analyses take into account the government stand and peoples reactions.

NEW EDUCATION POLICY

Addressing a group of leading Ulema of the country the Chief Martial Law Administrator Lieutenant General Ershad said on 15th May 1982 that the existing education system had to be recast in accordance with Islamic tradition and heritage "to suit the

genius of the people".⁶ He pointed out that the ideals of Prophet Mohammad could "lead us to the path of progress and save our younger generation from moral disbalance".⁷ His Advisor for Local Government, Mahabubur Rahman said that the state should have an education system which would suit the requirements of the country. The CMLA stressed that the existing education system needed reforms to make the younger generation ideal citizen and future leaders. Mr. Rahman added that the future education system would remove "alien influence, and infiltration into and indoctrination of our children against our cultural life Our Education system must make us Bangladeshis first and Bangladeshis last".⁸

As a part of the proposed new education policy Religious education and English was made compulsory in Class I and III level respectively. Ershad, who was then the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA), said that with a view to further strengthening the base of Islam, religious education had been made compulsory from Class I onward in all educational institutions. He hoped that Islamic education would help to build a character of future generation and establish a society free of corruption and exploitation.⁹

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6. H M Ershad, Public Opinion Trends (POT), Bangladesh Series 19th May 1982, pp.829-830, as quoted from Bangladesh Observer 16/5
 7. ibid.
 8. POT of 19th May 1982 p.830 as quoted from Bangladesh Observer 17/5/1982
 9. POT 13th July 1982 and POT 14th July 1982 pp.1179 and 1183 as quoted from New Nation 12/7

The Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Dr Abdul Majeed Khan said that the Islamic University which would be set up near Dhaka would be responsible for developing curriculum and evolving a suitable syllabi in the light of Islam.¹⁰ The government had decided to carry out a survey in forty villages to collect opinion whether or not it would be correct to teach Arabic and English at primary stage.¹¹

Commenting on General Ershad's proposed recasting of the education system according to the needs and genius of the people of Bangladesh, the columnist Saptabashi in Dainik Desh had claimed that the proposal would be heartily welcomed by the people of Bangladesh.¹²

Fifteen leading academicians of the country in a joint statement to the press on October 9 urged the government not to introduce Arabic and English education in the primary level of the education system. They felt that it was not necessary to teach any language other than the mother tongue at the primary level for children of such age would not be able to stand the pressure. This would in turn effect the main objective of education.¹³

10. POT 22nd July 1982 p. 1227 as quoted from Bangladesh Observer 20/7

11. POT 11th October 1982 p.1623 as quoted from Dainik Desh 8/10

12. POT 20th May 1982 p.842 as quoted from Dainik Desh 19th May 1982

13. POT 11th October 1982 p.1624 as quoted from Bangladesh Times, October 8, 1982

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In the past the students of East Pakistan had taken active part in the National Language Movement when the central government of Pakistan imposed Urdu as the only national language. They perceived this move as a threat to their cultural heritage. Through their initiative the Language movement spread among the masses and acquired such a magnitude that ultimately the government had to bend to the demands of the students.

In Bangladesh under Ershad also the students, belonging to a different generation, reacted spontaneously and resisted the government's designs. Once again they felt that their tradition, language and culture were threatened by a regime that was seeking legitimacy by harping on Islam by which it could win over a section of the population that was fundamentalist.

In the first wake of the agitation many lives were lost in police firing, universities were closed down¹⁴ and students observed strikes and absented from classes. They held a meeting at the campus of the Dhaka University to protest against the government's education policy. Students of Chittagong University also boycotted classes as a mark of protest.¹⁵ The agitation continued far and wide and student unrest and protest gained momentum followed by frequent strikes and boycott of classes by

14. Shyamali Ghosh, "The Struggle for Democratic Revolution in Bangladesh" in Urmila Phadnis, S D Muni, Kalim Bahadur ed., Domestic Conflict in South Asia, (New Delhi South Asian Publication) p.167
15. POT, December 15, 1982 p.1973 as quoted in Bangladesh Observer (Dhaka), 14/12

the students. Pro-government student organisations and anti-government students' organisations frequently clashed causing violence in the campus. Popular sentiments against the new education policy was so high that General Ershad had to drop the proposal of making Arabic compulsory from Class I.

Thus Ershad bowed down to the people who refused to support a government which had made religion a political issue in order to get mass support.

21st FEBRUARY CELEBRATIONS

Ekushey February was the next occasion when Ershad again tried to Islamize in 1983. Ekushey has been the symbol of the birth of Bengali Nationalism which in the long run culminated in the birth of Bangladesh. Ekushey February was the day when two students fell to the bullets of the Pakistani government during the Language movement.¹⁶ Since then this day has been always observed in Bangladesh as Shaheed Dibash (Martyr's Day).

General Ershad in his spree for Islamization declared that every Bangladeshi should believe in Islam. He said that Koran and Khwani would be held at the Shaheed Minar for the martyr's of the Language Movement of 21st February. He also

16. For details see Badruddin Umar, Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon O Tatkalin Rajniti, (Bengali) (Dhaka, Muktaadhara Prakashan, 1974)

criticised the drawing of Alpana on the occasion of Ekushey February and called it "un-Islamic".¹⁷

This announcement once again hurt the Bengali sentiments of the people of Bangladesh. Seventeen leading writers and intellectuals of Bangladesh in a statement jointly issued in Dhaka on January 19, after the declaration made by Ershad called upon all cultural workers, cultural organisations and intellectuals to observe 21st February unitedly in order to preserve national heritage and values. They pointed out that 21st February of 1983 had acquired a special significance in the context of the prevailing situation. According to them the language and culture of Bangladesh was not yet free from the hazards and the arena of art and culture had been in a mess due to spread of anti-culture and promotion of obscurtanism.¹⁸

Political parties took up their stand on the issue. Fifteen political parties called upon the people to observe Ekushey February unitedly throughout the country in order to resist the "frequent attempts made by reactionary forces to disorient the awareness for Ekushey for the last thirty years". They pointed out that Ekushey February had been the inspiration for many movements which ultimately led to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.¹⁹

17. POT 17th January 1983, p.99 as quoted from New Nation 18/1

18. POT 21st January 1983 p.121 as quoted from New Nation 20/1

19. POT 1st February 1983, p.194 as quoted from New Nation 31/1

The 15-Party²⁰ Alliance appealed to the people to observe Ekushey February on the basis of common programme and under a common set of slogans. The programmes included the formulation of All-Party Ekushey Observance Committees throughout the country; intensive joint publicity highlighting the significance of the day; non-communalism and arousing national consciousness; opposition to anti-people language and culture and educational policies; holding of seminars and series of patriotic songs; placing of floral wreaths at the Shaheed Minars in conformity with the traditional practices; and holding of mass oath-taking functions at all Shaheed Minars including the central Shaheed Minar at Dhaka.²¹

The common slogan endorsed by the parties included the guarantees to the freedom of press; restoration of the constitution; holding of free and fair elections for transfer of power to elected representatives, firm and resolute resistance to all anti-independence forces; and observance of the sanctity of Shaheed Day and Shaheed Minars.²²

The Bangladesh Awami League in a separate statement called upon the patriotic people and the party workers to make the

20. It is an opposition alliance led by Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and includes parties like NAP(M), CPB etc. It seeks to restore the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh. ◊

21. POT 1st February 1983, p.194-196 as quoted from New Nation, 31/1

22. ibid.

all-party programme for observance of Ekushey February a complete success.²³

The students who had always been so volatile and active in Bangladesh politics also came out with their own programme of protest against the Chief Martial Law Administrator's address. The Central Student's Action Committee, which was formed for the observance of Ekushey, called upon the students and people to observe Ekushey February unitedly for advancing the struggle for education, democracy and exploitation-free society with a spirit of unity of "Ekushey"²⁴

A committee comprising educationalists, artists, literatuers and members of different cultural organisations was formed to observe Ekushey February in a befitting manner.²⁵

At last an inter-ministerial meeting was held in Dhaka on February 6th, regarding the observance of various programmes commemorating Amar Ekushey February with due solemnity. It was presided over by the minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Dr A Majeed Khan. The meeting was attended by Home Minister Maj. Gen Mohabbat Jan Chowdhury and others. After the meeting the official source declared that no permission would be required for any socio-cultural group to observe the day with due solemnity and

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23. POT 3rd February 1983 p.217 as quoted from New Nation 2/2
 24. POT 2nd February 1983 p.208 as quoted from New Nation 1/2
 25. POT 4th February 1983, p.227 as quoted from New Nation 3/2

befitting manner.²⁶ It also declared that night curfew which was on would be lifted on the night of February 20, to permit observance of that day. The national flag would fly half mast and festoons of Bengali alphabet would be displayed. Arrangement for special prayers would be made in mosques, temples and churches.²⁷

The BBC aired a report that the students affiliated with the secularist opposition had declared the General's proposal of recital of the Koran on the occasion of Martyr's Day was a negation of the achievement of the February Movement, of "changing basic state policy and promoting interest of a group of persons in the name of religion".²⁸

The controversy to politicise religion did not end with words. Two student groups of students engaged in a bloody battle in Dhaka University in which more than two hundred students were injured.²⁹ The student leadership did not take a pragmatic view to avoid confrontation with the law enforcing authorities.

On the following day the government arrested thirty political leaders of the 15-Party coalition led by the Awami

26. Martial Law restrictions required permission for the observance of any cultural programme.

27. POT February 8, 1983, p.251

28. Charles Peter O'Donnel, Bangladesh : Biogragphy of a Muslim Nation, (West View Press London and Boulder, 1984) p. 256

29. ibid.

League, and member of the Students' Action Committee. Four hundred students were arrested, night curfew was imposed and the university was closed.³⁰

In a broadcast on 18th February the General adopted a concilliatory stance and paid rich tributes to the martyrs of the Language Movement and called for upliftment of Bengali Language and culture.³¹

Ultimately 21st February was celebrated all over Bangladesh with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. Keeping the tradition, students of Dhaka art college drew Alpana designs on the road in front of the Shaheed Minar.³²

Thus for the second time under Ershad the military regime had to bow down in front of popular protests against Islamization policies.

EIGHTH AMENDMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION

President Ershad's Islamisation attempt of the body polity is the most significant development in Bangladesh in recent

30. *ibid.*

31. CMLA, HM Ershad's Speech in POT 21st February 1983 p.325 as quoted from Bangladesh Observer, (Dhaka), 19th February 1983

32. POT February 24, 1983 pp.354-357 for details of the Ekushey February Celebrations

years. It has given rise to unprecedented religious fundamentalism which has virtually communalised politics and widened the division between the various communities living in Bangladesh. All the dreaded manifestations of this dangerous development is visible practically in every walk of life threatening to whip up communal frenzy.³³

On 11th May 1988 at Jatiya Sansad³⁴ the Government brought in the major amendment to constitution of the country making Islam the state religion. The eighth Amendment Bill placed before the House provided for addition of a new provision after Article 2 as Article 2A which is as follows :

"2A, the state religion of the republic is Islam but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the republic".³⁵

In his quest for survival and legitimacy Ershad has taken this drastic step by moving the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution in 1988 by which he sought to gain support of the religious fundamentalists and by doing so neutralise the opposition as he thought that the opposition would have no say against the Amendment which he sought to make declaring Islam to be the state religion of Bangladesh.

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33. Manash Ghosh "Ershad in Power, Challenge of Fundamentalism" The Statesman, (New Delhi) 5th August 1989
34. The Jatiya Sangsad was elected in March of the same year in which the major opposition parties had not participated. The opposition consisted of Freedom Party, JSD (Siraj) and others only.
35. POT May 14, 1988 p.1005

President Ershad's struggle to gain popular support for the power he seized six years ago took a dramatic and desperate turn with his announcement. His original strategy was to maintain mandate through controlled elections. But the latest election held in March 1988 failed to give him such mandate as the opposition boycotted the polls and the turn out was low.³⁶

From the beginning of 1983 General Ershad kept on repeating in almost all public meetings he attended that he wished to make Bangladesh an Islamic Republic and granted monthly pension to Imams and free water and electricity to mosques.³⁷ He insisted that Islam was the only life style to be followed and said that the path shown and followed by the Prophet was the only path for liberation and advancement of the people.³⁸

With the passage of time, as the regime's inability to solve domestic problems increased, he started harping on Islam even more frequently. He pointed out that Bangladesh was a land of hundred million Muslims but no decision has been taken about the state religion.³⁹

The government led Jatiya Party reiterated its determination to uphold sentiments and religious faiths of the

36. The Times, (London) 18th March 1983

37. POT 3rd January 1983, p.13 as quoted from Azad 1/1

38. ibid.

39. POT Vo. 13 11th February 1988, p. 348 as quoted from New Nation 6/12

people and welcomed President Ershad's call to declare Islam as the State Religion of Bangladesh. The Jatiya Party and its Chairman President Ershad gained appreciation and confidence at home and abroad from the orthodox and fundamentalist quarters for sincerity and devotion to Islamic values.⁴⁰

The Freedom Party Chief Col. Farukh Rahman (Retd) ⁴¹ also welcomed President Ershad's decision to make Islam the state religion of Bangladesh. He insisted that the problems facing the present state can only be solved if Islamic order of society is established.⁴²

The Jamaat-i-Islami of Bangladesh was however not impressed by the President's statement to make Islam the state religion of Bangladesh and called it a "bluff" of the government in order to divert the attention of the people from the present political crisis. Its leader stated that holding of free and fair election for the restoration of democracy could only be the beginning for the building of Islamic society based on Koran and Sunnah.⁴³

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40. _ 12th February 1988, pp.361-362 as quoted from New Nation 10/2
41. Co. Farukh had been one of the Co-conspirators along with Col Rashid in assassination of Sheikh Mujib. He is an orthodox Muslim and stands for an Islamic Order. For this idea on the salvation of Bangladesh See Muktir Path (Bengali) Col. Farukh and Col. Rashid, (Dhaka, 1984)
42. POT 26th January 1988, p.474 as quoted from New Nation 25.2
43. POT 19th May 1988, p.1044

The Eight-Party Alliance Leader and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina said that her party believes in secularism which does not mean absence of any religion. It hinted that the amendment to make Islam the state religion of Bangladesh would disturb the communal harmony of the country.⁴⁴

The other main opposition in Bangladesh that is the Seven-Party Combine⁴⁵ led by BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) said that government was using Islam for political gains.⁴⁶

Different professionals, students and teachers associations of Bangladesh have also opposed the government's stand for politicising Islam. They thought that the attempt to make Islam the state religion is a bid to confuse the people.⁴⁷

President Ershad expressed confidence that recognition of Islam as the state religion would firmly establish the distinct identity of the nation along with language, culture and heritage.⁴⁸

44. POT 10th March, 1988, p.554 as quoted from New Nation 8/3

45. This is the other main opposition in Bangladesh. The parties in this alliance are for a Presidential form of government and restoration of democracy and going back to the constitution framed by Zia.

46. POT 19th March 1988, p.590 as quoted from New Nation 15/3

47. POT 21st March 1988, pp.605-606 as quoted from Bangladesh Observer 19/3

48. POT 14th May 1988, p.1006 as quoted from Daily News 12th May 1988

Speaking in parliament during one debate before the passage of the Religion Bill the Prime Minister Mr. Moudud Ahmed pointed out that there was no place of communalism in Bangladesh, and as far as secularism was concerned, Bangladesh would remain secular as there has no discrimination between man and man on grounds of religion.⁴⁹ If this was so then observers contended that the eighth Amendment was quite meaningless since it did not give Bangladesh a government based on Koran and Sunnah.⁵⁰

Faith is something that is not bound by legislation. Had it been so, there would have been no crusades. Bangladesh emerged as a secular state on the basis of homogeneity of language, race and culture. If the country was forced to turn to theocracy then the very raison-d-etre of its birth would be negated. Ershad had not been a freedom fighter and hence has no emotional affinity for Bangladesh revolution and its secular ideals. For a man of such a background it might not be of much concern to opt for Islamic theocracy. But the consequences for such a move for a country like Bangladesh would be quite grave.⁵¹

49. POT 17th June 1988 p. 1227

50. According to the Koran the non-believers are regarded as infidels and looked down upon. In an Islamic state the head of the state has to be a Muslim. But nowhere in the constitution of Bangladesh such a condition is mentioned.

51. Samar Guha, "Ershad Subverts the Revolution" The Statesman, 25th May 1988.

The opposition rejected the Bill because it felt that it was dangerous. The Liaison which was formed of eminent jurists, scholars and academicians apart from politicians to look into the Amendment were of the view that by "dragging religion into the illegal parliament the Government has destroyed the sacredness of Islam". The opposition looked upon the Amendment as an attempt by Ershad to perpetuate the military rule.⁵²

The reaction of the student community was as usual a volatile one opposing the government's move vehemently. Buses were burnt by them.⁵³

The minorities' reaction to the Islamization has been significant. Fifty one eminent Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Bangladeshis in a joint statement said that by declaring Islam the State religion it would deprive the followers of other religions their rights.⁵⁴ They have floated their own new political parties philanthropic organisations and religious bodies with communal labels. Their objective as they explain is to "protect our minority identity against the onslaught of Muslim fundamentalism".⁵⁵

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52. Abha Dixit, "Islamisation in Bangladesh" Mainstream (vol 26, no. 48, 10th September 1988) p.22
 53. POT 14th May 1988, p.1007 as quoted from New Nation 12th May 1988
 54. Deccan Herald (Bangalore) 16th May 1988
 55. Ghosh, n33

A women's organisation Okwabaddha Nari Samaj staged a demonstration in Dhaka and stated that it would only increase exploitation of women and push them deeper into backwardness.⁵⁶

But despite this move Ershad has not been able to stop the movement for democratisation of the polity launched by the opposition on the one-point programme to remove him. Basically what he has done is to strike a body blow to the ideals of Bangladesh freedom struggle. But he has however misjudged the popular feelings of the people who cannot be pacified by mere sacking of Right Wing minister unless the amendment itself is withdrawn.⁵⁷ The Eighth Amendment has drawn a lot of fire in Bangladesh which could have been avoided. The entire opposition including the Jamaat was united against the government.

How far has this move served Ershad's purpose of gaining legitimacy by splitting the opposition and gaining the votes of the fundamentalists are yet to be seen. Its ability to attract more petro-dollars into the staggering economic situation of the country is still not very impressive. The political future of Bangladesh is very uncertain at present. It has proved that Islamization of society will not divert the attention of the people of Bangladesh from political issues. A democratic polity & not a Islamic one would satisfy them more.

56. n.54

57. Charvak, "Ershad's Miscalculation" Mainstream (vol.26 no.36, 13th June 1988) p.3

CHAPTER V

REACTIONS TO ISLAMIZATION II
(POLITICAL PARTIES & ELECTIONS)

C H A P T E R V

REACTIONS TO ISLAMISATION - II

(POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTIONS)

In a democratic system of modern times elections are particularly important for political articulation and legitimacy. Elections are not ritualistic or simplistic events. They are a complex process involving individual and collective decisions which directly affect the outcome or is the outcome of the political process. Thus study of elections can be called the study of political system in action. V.O Key defines elections as, "a formal act of collective decision that occurs in a stream of collected antecedent and subsequent behaviour".¹

There are several indicators by which the basis of elections have been analyzed. Norman D.Palmer writes,

"Elections have been analyzed on the basis of the factors influencing, and the motivations of, the individual voter, the electorate as a collectivity, the representatives chosen through the electoral process, the kind of government that is produced and the nature and degree of its actual responsibility to the electorate and the role of elections in the functioning and development of the political system."²

1. V O Key (Jr) "A Theory of Critical Elections" Journal of Politics February 1955, p.3
2. Norman D Palmer, Elections and Political Development : The South Asian Experience, (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1975) p.2

In actual practice, elections have different meanings and play different roles in different political systems. In some they have stabilizing effects and in others they have destabilizing effects. They may also be used as thinly veiled disguises for various authoritarian rule or as institutionalized procedures for maintenance of democratic rule. They may be considered as devices of legitimacy, identification and socialization, mobilization and political choice.³

Samuel Huntington has observed that in many transitional countries' elections serve only to enhance the power of disruptive and reactionary social forces and tear down the structure of public authority.⁴

In every society the voters' feelings about parties, issues and candidates are not selfgenerating. Like other human attitudes they are formed by the interaction of his psychological make up and his physical and social environment. Factors such as socio economic status, religion, family influence and the state of affairs of the nation affects ones attitudes towards parties, issues and candidates. As depths of religious fervour varies markedly from one person to another, so too does the intensity of party identification.

3. *ibid.* p.7

4. S.P. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, (New Heaven, Yale University Press 1968) pp.444-445

In every type of political system elections and political parties have a very close relationship. During elections parties are put on trial. Elections are mechanisms by which the parties maintain their support bases and establish links between non-political and political system.⁵

Elections are means of choosing who shall govern. They are also a means for influencing the elected leaders for determining who shall govern. In countries where democratic systems are not very deeply rooted and less well developed and genuinely accepted, elections are used rather to endorse and give legitimacy.⁶ Another major function of elections is to provide opportunities. Such participation changes the democratic system.

Since elections are an indication of political participation, voting turnout is usually considered as the main indicator for political participation.⁷ However, high turnout need not always be fully representative of a genuinely democratic system. Highest turnouts are to be found in totalitarian and authoritarian systems where elections are used to demonstrate support for one party regimes where citizens are virtually compelled to vote.⁸ In other words, legitimacy means general acceptance of the claims of the holders of authority to rule and

5. Palmer, n.2 p.17
6. *ibid*, pp.52-53
7. *ibid* p.71
8. *ibid*. p.75

the recognition of constitutional structure as just and appropriate for society⁹. Political stability requires balancing of legitimacy of the constitution and personal legitimacy.

Bangladesh in its two decades of existence has seen a number of coups by which the democratic system was upset. In 1972 when the first constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh came into force, it was a multi-party parliamentary system of Government. In 1973, the ruling Awami League was returned to power by an overwhelming majority. But the party itself amended the Constitution through the fourth amendment and made it into a one-party presidential form of Government. The ruling Awami League was thrown out of power through a violent coup on 15th August 1975. In November, by two coups in quick succession, Zia-ur-Rahman emerged as the strong man.

Zia tried to legitimise his rule by a referendum in May 1977. Zia defined socialism by social and economic justice. He declared that there would be no acquisition of private property without compensation and seeking solidarity with the Muslim States would be one of the fundamental policies of the Government¹⁰. On 30th May, he held a referendum in which the electorate was asked,

9. Abul Fazal Haq, "The Problems of Legitimacy and Elections in (Bangladesh), Journal of Social Science, vol 24, July 1988, p.50
10. These were certain Islamic principles details which are in Marcus Franda, Bangladesh : the First Decade. He also had a 19-Point Programme which included privatisation of industries which is an Islamic principle. As such religion or Islamization was not stressed.

"Do you have confidence in Zia?". He won by 98% affirmative votes. Awami League, the major opposition abstained and Jatia Samajtantric Dal, another important opposition group opposed. Turnout of voters was about 88%¹¹. Since then, Zia tried steadily to build a political base for himself.

In June 1978, in order to strengthen his base, Zia further held Presidential elections. A new political front by the name Jagadal came into the picture which supported Zia's candidature. This party stood for Bangladeshi nationalism¹² and Presidential form of Government. He won the elections despite opposition coalition.

In 1979, Zia held parliamentary elections before which he launched his party named Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The party did not mention any thing specifically about his policy towards religion but promised certain democratic ideals. In the elections, it got a thumping majority¹³. While religion was not mentioned during 1979 election, Zia legalised the constitutional changes regarding religion that were made by Martial Law

11. *ibid.*

12. Bangladeshi nationalism as distinct from Bengali nation of Mujib had a streak of Islamic element in it. For "Bangladeshi Nationalism" see Marcus Franda "Zia-ur-Rahman and Bangladeshi Nationalism", Economic and Political Weekly, (vol 11, no. 25 Annual 1981) p.377

13. For details see S R Chakravarty, Bangladesh the 1979 Elections. (New Delhi, South Asian Publication, 1988) Details of the party positions are given at the end of the chapter

Promulgation through the 5th Amendment passed in the Jatiya Sangsad while the country was still under Martial Law. The opposition had walked out during the voting in the Jatiya Sangsad dominated by BNP members.

In 1981, Zia was removed by assassination. After four months of uncertainty, Ershad took up the reigns of Government in his own hands.

Ershad faced the same problem as faced by other military leaders of the third world i.e. legitimacy. In quest of legitimacy Ershad also adopted measures similar to that of Zia's, but with more vigour. Just as he further liberalised the economy he made free use of Islam to consolidate his position in a Muslim majority country. His initial efforts to islamise the society by redefining the education policy and some aspects of cultural practices having failed,¹⁴ he tried other more populist methods.

When he took over power Ershad had promised early parliamentary elections. In the beginning of 1986 he lifted the ban on open political activities as the first step towards parliamentary elections. Initially the date fixed was March 22, 1986.¹⁵

14. Details of Ershad's Islamisation policies and the reaction which it triggered are discussed in the previous chapter

15. Bangladesh Observer, (Dhaka), 1st and 2nd January 1986

The opposition in Bangladesh mainly consisted of a 15-party Alliance led by Awami League and the 7-Party combine led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Jatiya Party was the party supported by the government. Apart from the two main opposition parties other important parties in Bangladesh were Jamaat-i-Islami and Communist Party of Bangladesh.

Although the two Alliances were opposed to each other in a number of issues, they formed a common programme on the basis of Five-Point demands which became the basis of their entire plan of agitation. These included immediate withdrawal of Martial Law; restoration of fundamental rights; parliamentary elections preceding other elections; release of political prisoners and trial of persons responsible for mid-February Students' Killings.¹⁶ To coordinate the activities between the two alliances, a liaison committee was formed. However, each party had its own programme and manifesto with which it faced the electorate.¹⁷ The profiles of some important parties is discussed below.

JATIYA PARTY

The Jatiya Party was formed just before the elections. It was formed from the Janadal which came into existence just

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16. Sayed Sarajul Islam, "Bangladesh in 1986 : Entering a New Phase" Asian Survey, (vol. 27, no. 2, February 1987) pp 163-172
 17. The Party Programmes are from Multi Party Political System of Bangladesh External Publicity Wing. Ministry of Information, Govt of People's Republic of Bangladesh

before the referendum. It emerged on 1st January 1986 when President Ershad removed ban on all political activities. It promises to bring about national unity for achieving a democratic order and social stability in the country. During the presidential elections that followed the parliamentary elections, Ershad was nominated as its chairman and contested the polls as a candidate of the Jatiya Party.

The party is based on five fundamental principles: Independence and sovereignty, Islamic ideals and respect for people of all religions, Bangladeshi nationalism, democracy and social progress aiming at economic emancipation.

The basic principles of the Jatiya Party envisages the following aims and objectives:

- 1) To achieve national consensus and unity of Bangladeshi nation on all fundamental issues of the state.
- 2) To protect national independence and sovereignty by conducting an uncompromising struggle against all forms of hegemonism and expansion and their local socio-political base and to attain solidarity with the third world, Muslim countries in particular, in their struggle against hegemonism.
- 3) To uphold the spirit and ideals of Independence War in 1971 and honour the freedom fighters as national heroes.

- 4) To establish a social justice based state with a sound political and administrative system
- 5) To ensure internal political stability as a pre-condition for social progress and strengthen democratic institution.
- 6) To pave the way for the growth of national capital by putting an end to the indiscriminate nationalism policy in interest of an independent national economy and to build a structure of indigenous and available technology.
- 7) To complete implementation of land reforms and modernize agriculture to improve the lot of peasants and raise production.
- 8) To establish Islamic ideals, ensure tolerance to the people of all other religions and protect religious independence.
- 9) To develop the culture and heritage of ethnic minorities and project their socio-economic interests.
- 10) To develop Bangladesh culture.

The party fielded for all three-hundred constituencies and thirty seats reserved for women.¹⁸

18. *ibid.*

AWAMI LEAGUE

The Awami League is one of the oldest political organisations of the country. Before emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country the party mobilised massive support for its six-point charter of demand which was based on Bengali nationalism. It believes in four basic principles - nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy.

In 1986 elections it was committed to realise the ideals of "Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and restore the constitution of 1972." It aims at exploitation free egalitarian society through agricultural reforms based on multi-purpose village co-operatives, modernization of agricultural production, collective participation of the peasants, workers and government in the management of production and distribution of wealth, expansion of cottage industry, strengthening of the foundation of self-reliant economy and fixation of ceiling on private ownership.

The party attaches importance to consolidation of friendly ties with Soviet Union and India. The Awami League was the component of 15 party alliance which was formed on January 30, 1983 to carry on a united movement for restoration of "democracy". The party is secular in its ideas and does not mention anything regarding Islam in its manifesto.

BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY (BNP)

The BNP was founded by late President Zia-Ur-Rahman. It stood for Bangladeshi nationalism and upholds the constitution of 1977. This party does not explicitly mention anything about Islam or religion as such in its manifesto. This party was the leader of 7 party combine opposition front against martial law. The BNP and its allies did not take part in the election of 1986 as a protest against governmental inaction towards its 5 point programme for restoration of democracy.

COMMUNIST PARTY OF BANGLADESH (CPB)

The objective of the CPB is to bring about basic as well as complete change of the fate of workers, peasants and middle strata masses who had been exploited and oppressed. Its ideological basis is Marxism-Leninism adhering to the then Soviet Orbit.

The party believes in establishment of socialism in the country in scientific manner taking into consideration the country's socio-economic backwardness while remaining close to the traditions and values of society. It also aims to promote secularism. Considering the hurdles on the road to socialism and resistance by imperialism and its local reactionaries, the CPB pursues a policy of supporting "the pro-people patriotic governments" to lead the country towards self reliant economy and social progress.

The CPB advocates strengthening of the public sector in the economic arena which it believes will contribute to the establishment of socialism through constitutional means.

JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI

It is a cadre-based fundamentalist religio-political organisation. It is widely considered as a "fanatic and communal religious party" while it proclaims itself to be a religious, social, cultural and political organisation. It carries the banner of a complete Islamic movement and Islamic revolution.

The party aims at establishing of pious and competent Muslims at all tiers of the state by overthrowing the leadership of the dishonest and those who are not faithful to the Allah.

Its programme is to raise the level of awareness among the Muslims about the Koran and Hadis through invitation and motivation to train up its workers for Islamic revolution, to attract people towards the Islamic order through social reforms, moral purification, language and social welfare works and to establish a government under its leadership. The Jamaat is not only religious, but by its objectives it is overtly communal. Jamaat has not been in any alliance since the promulgation of martial law but it has been in the anti-martial law and anti-government movement.

During the election campaign (1984) the stress of the opposition was mainly against martial law. There was mass agitation against the regime to lift Martial Law before elections. Despite this, the weakness of the opposition lay in its failure to forge a united programme. The ground work of the Liaison committee that was formed to bring together the two opposition alliances was almost complete when a rift occurred on March 21 when Awami League decided to participate in the elections after President Ershad announced revised election schedule as 7th May. The BNP and its allies demanded three pre-conditions for participating in the elections -restoration of fundamental rights, release of political prisoners and annulment of the judgement against politician convicted under Martial law.^{18a}

According to the opposition free and fair polls are not possible under a martial law regime. However, Awami League's departure from the United Movement did great damage to opposition unity against martial law. The Awami League's decision to contest the election appears to have been motivated by the fact that by doing so it would have sacrificed its long term goal for short term benefits.

Observers believed that the Opposition's unity was based on commonly agreed minimum demands only. Thus they united with a limited objective of bringing to an end the undemocratic system of

18a. Islam, n.16 pp 163-172

Ershad. But they had no agreement between them on the details of the alternative system. While the Seven party alliance wants constitution of 1982 till Ershad come to power, the fifteen party alliance wants restoration of 1972 constitution.¹⁹

The Jatiya Party was sponsored by the Government and Ershad himself took part in the election meetings of Jatiya Party and urged the people to vote for the party. He in his speeches, had frequently referred to Islam and teachings of Prophet Mohammad as the only source to remove miseries and distress of the people.²⁰

The opposition alliances also criticised Ershad for mixing religion and politics.

President Ershad's comment that the army would standby to ensure fairness of the poll generated more suspicion about the fairness of the poll.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, 1986 :

Elections were held on 7th May 1986. Election day was marred with violence and rigging. Awami League chief Sheikh

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19. Shyamali Ghosh, "Struggle for Democratic Revolution in Bangladesh" in Urmila Phadnis, S D Muni and Kalim Bahadur ed., Domestic Politics in South Asia, New Delhi p. 168
 20. POT, January 18, 21, 1986 pp.185-207 as quoted from Morning Post 16/1 quoting BSS

Hasina blamed the Government for "widespread violence and massive rigging which could be described as ballot dacoity".²¹

Western reporters and observers who had come alleged that the Government had resorted to widespread unfair means and rigging. According to BBC commentary the parliamentary election which was held after seven years had been 'unusually chaotic'.²²

New Nation correspondent wrote that twenty people were killed and several hundreds injured in the clashes that took place during the poll. Table 2 shows comparative picture of Jatiya Sansad elections of 1973, 1979 and 1986. According to the Table the total number of people who are eligible to vote increased as also the total number of candidates. The percentage of votes polled decreased in 1979 elections as compared to 1973 elections. This shows that the people of Bangladesh are quite apprehensive about the fairness of a poll in a military regime and preferred to stay away from it than participate in it. Figure of 1986 election voting turn out is disputed by the opposition.

The BNP and the Awami League asked for fresh elections. They termed the elections as a 'total farce'. The final tally of the poll results in the three elections is shown in Table 3.

21. POT, Vol 11 May 13th, 1986, p.993 as quoted from Bangladesh Observer 12/5

22. POT, May 16th, 1986, p.1009, as quoted from Bangladesh Observer, 14/5

The election results usually showed that despite massive rigging, (described as 'murder of democracy' by foreign press), the Government controlled Jatiya Party was not able to win two-thirds majority in the parliament. The Jamaat won 10 seats while the Awami League proved that it is still to force a reckoning by winning seventy six seats. The Communist Party of Bangladesh despite its chequered career, was able to win five seats in the Jatiya Sansad. A comparative election results shows that political parties with Islamic leanings had never fared well in the Jatiya Sansad polls in Bangladesh whether in a civilian or a military rule. Whether there had been rigging or not, it is only the parties which have more or less a secular manifesto that have won and parties like Jamaat and Muslim League etc have not been able to capture very many seats.

This study proved that religion and religious considerations of the political parties had little to do with voting behaviour of the people of Bangladesh. Had it not been so, the Islamic parties would have got more seats than it actually got in the Sansad and the CPB would not have won any. And if rigging was the order of the day, Ershad could not rig the polls to an extent to get two-thirds majority. This showed that Awami Leagues' programme of secularism and Bengali Nationalism still meant a lot for the people who did not wholly support Jatiya Party's Islamization policies. As in the popular movement the

election (1986) results of Bangladesh once again prove(s) that the people of Bangladesh by and large, like to keep religion and politics as two separate issues and do not like to mix them. During political participation they do not give primary importance to religious issues.

TABLE 2

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JATIYA SANSAD ELECTIONS OF 1973, 1979 AND 1986

	1973 March 7	1979 Feb 18	1986 May 7
No. of Voters	3,38,96,777	3,86,37,668	4,78,76,979
No. of participating Parties	14	29	28
No. of total Candidates	1,091	2,125	1,527
Independents	120	422	453
Total Seats	300	300	300
Average No. of Candidates	3.63	7.08	5.00
Percentage of Polling	55.62	50.94	60 ⁺

Source : Sangbad 7/5/86

TABLE 3

PARTY POSITIONS IN THE THREE ELECTIONS*

Name of the Party	Seats Won		
	1973	1979	1986
Jatiya Party			153
Awami League	292	2	76
Jamaat I-Islami			10
Communist Party of Bangladesh			5
N A P (U)			4
Muslim League			4
J S D (Rab)			4
BAKSAL			3
J S D (Siraj)			3
Workers Party			3
N A P (M)			2
B N P		207	
Independents	5	16	32
Awami League (MU)		39	
I D L (R)		20	
J S D		8	
Bangladesh Jatiya League	2		
National Socialist Party	1		

* Source: POT 22nd May 1986 P.1038 (for 1986 results) for 1979 results Chakravarty n.13 1973 results n.10.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

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The expressions "Islamization" or "Islamic Resurgence" have gained currency during recent years mostly due to the publicity given to it by the Western media after the Iranian Revolution. But seen more closely Islamization is not a new phenomenon. Islamization of non-Muslims which is conversion is as old as the history of Islam. But Islamization or Islamic Resurgence when discussed in the present context means Islamization of Muslims. In other words, it signifies bringing the apparently deviant faithful to the orthodox fold. This variety of Islamization is not an entirely new trend. What is new about it is the state-sponsored Islamic revival as a political and a social system through the promised implementation of the Shariah.

The non-state sponsored revivalist movements have about six hundred years history behind them. In Egypt and the Arab world, the Salafia movement of Shaikh Muhammad Abdub, Ikhwanul Muslimoon and scholars like Muhammad Qutub and revivalist movements in Malaysia and Indonesia represent a long tradition of Islamic fundamentalism. The trend aims at establishing Muslim

societies on the fundamentals of Islam enshrined in the Koran and the Hadith and eradicating all elements not supposed to be in the fundamentals.¹

In the area of the sub-continent that now constitutes Bangladesh, if one traces its history, Islamization in all the forms are visible. The people here got converted to Islam mostly by Sufi influence in order to escape from the onslaught of the Hindu Sena rulers on them who were mostly Buddhists.

Wahabi and the Faraizi movements of the Nineteenth century were a sort of Islamization which penetrated the mass level in order to purify the people who, according to the religious preachers had deviated from the path of true Islam. These movements, particularly the Fraizi movement with economic underpinning did generate mass participation in certain areas of the then Bangal. The 19th and the early 20th centuries under the British rule also saw low key confrontation between the orthodox and the liberals in the field of language and culture. But the post-colonial variety of Islamization which is sponsored by the state is not very much appreciated in Bangladesh.

As a politically integrated unit of the pre-1971 Pakistani state Bangladesh witnessed the Islamization attempts made by the central

1. Anwar Moazzam, "Resurgence of Islam : Role of the State and the People" in Anwar Moazzam (ed) Islam and Contemporary Muslim World, Light and Life Publications, new Delhi 1981, pp. 1-2

government of Pakistan. But its effect had been quite negligible as seen during the Language Movement which gave birth to Bengali nationalism. Ayub Khan's slogan of "Islam in danger" was not appreciated by the people of East Pakistan who were more interested in isolating the politico-economic issues than the religious ones which were kept away from mainstream politics.

The reason for this is not far to seek. In 1935 the Muslims of East Bengal had voted for Fazlul Haq's broad based politics of Dal-Bhat and not for the sectarian Muslim League. This tradition of economic and political demands getting a priority over religious demands have continued ever since. Moreover, the Bengali Muslims being conscious about their cultural identity brought them to clash with Pakistan's central government when the latter tried to Islamise their culture.

✓ Thus Islamization in its traditional meaning was never appreciated in Bangladesh where people were more conscious of their politico-economic demands and struggled for democratisation and some sort of egalitarian society. Even Bhasani's concept of Islamic Socialism could not mobilise enough organised political support which was borne out by repeated splits in his party (NAP) which started as the umbrella party for the entire left-political elements in Pakistan.

Student politics in Bangladesh, even before independence, have been always Left oriented radical politics. For them religion based politics was totally out of question. Student politics from a very long time has played a very important role in Bangladesh politics as a whole. They have been the key to all the major movements in Bangladesh and a catalyst in politicising the means to start mass movements in that country. This is possible because the level of urbanisation in Bangladesh is very low and the students who come to the cities still have their roots intact in the villages. Thus for them it is easier to mobilise the masses of the villages for any movement.

In a background like this religion would be expected to have minimal role in politics. However, religious fundamentalism did surface in 1971 during the Liberation movement in form of Al-Badr and Al-Shams who opposed Bangladesh's separation of Pakistan. But this did not mean that they had any political base in Bangladesh as proved by the 1971 elections where the Awami League with its Six-Point programme of autonomy had swept the polls and the Jaamat-i-Islami and Islamist parties fared miserably. It can be thus said that these fundamentalists were induced by some vested interests obviously working for the Pakistani military junta which was supposedly the standard bearer of Islamic ideology.

Some observers say that Mujib attended Islamic Summit at Lahore in order to gain recognition of Pakistan and other Islamic states which enabled Bangladesh to solve the problem of Prisoner of War and also to gain an entry to the United Nations. A further motive could have been to appease the Islamists. Therefore despite the secular politics that predominated the Bangladesh society at its birth, there must have been an under-current of Islamic desires and designs. Bangladeshi regimes have often made use of this presence. But the mere presence of a politically weak Islamicist elements in the society could not have been the *raison de-etre* for Islamization.

Bangladesh started in 1971 with a war ravaged economy. It depended heavily on foreign aid to build it up. India, initially, was the main aid donor to Bangladesh. But the problems of Bangladesh had been so great that it was not possible for India alone to pull up its shattered economy. Consequently, there was a conscious effort to diversify Bangladesh's dependence. At this juncture Bangladesh's linkages with the oil rich west asian countries and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) became very crucial for Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh is perhaps the least developed member of the OIC, its assumed Islamic identity has helped her to attain a prominent position in it.

Besides, Islam is used by the regimes in the post-Mujib period to gain legitimacy since they came to power by unconstitutional

means. Zia changed the basic character of the constitution and Ershad has gone to the extent of amending the constitution to make Islam the state religion in Bangladesh.

Despite Ershad's several Islamization attempts like Islamizing the 21st February celebrations, making Arabic compulsory at the primary education level, and making Islam the state religion of Bangladesh etc., its impact is not felt very much on the people of Bangladesh and there have been vehement protest movements against these moves. The electoral politics of Bangladesh has also shown results which do not reflect support for Islamization moves.

If observed more carefully, it is noticed that Islamization moves made by Ershad are quite cautious. It seems that he was trying to feel the pulse-rate of the people. Like his predecessor Zia-Ur-Rahman, he is also very careful.² However Zia's moves were not challenged to a great extent since at that time the nation was quite shocked by the event of 15th August 1975 by which Mujib and his entire family was assassinated. Ershad, on the other hand has met with opposition since under him certain amount of democratisation of politics has taken place.

2. The day Zia amended the constitution to legalise religion based parties banned under Mujib, he sacked his minister Toab who was known for his fundamentalist ideas. Similarly, Ershad also dropped conservative Maulana Abdul Matin, his Minister of Religious Affairs, after passing the 8th Amendment.

✓ However, Ershad's moves towards Islamization do not appear to be based on total conviction regarding Islamic orthodoxy. Even the Islamic parties have opposed them and have termed it as "political use of Islam". Ershad has himself said in his speeches that Saudi Arabia's variety of Islamization will not be suited for Bangladesh. If he plans to have a liberal Islam then it already exists in Bangladesh as the people of Bangladesh at the personal level are quite pious and religious minded.

It is true that there is a limit to how much Ershad can Islamize the society of Bangladesh. His power structure also includes people some of whom are known for their western liberalist views and some others for their affiliation to left oriented politics. It is difficult to believe that they, with their liberal and secular legacy, would allow Ershad to go beyond a certain point. ✓ Thus if he feels that one of his main purposes of Islamization i.e., to gain legitimacy is defeated, he would rather not take such a step. If Ershad was really genuine about Islamization, then he would rather align himself with the Jamaat. But this would be counter productive if he intends to stay in power.

✓ Economic factors have also contributed to Islamization. Firstly to attract petro-dollar was important for Bangladesh. But it is indeed doubtful whether Ershad has been able to attract more petro-dollar following his Islamization moves. But non-resident

Bangladeshis working in the Middle East contribute a great extent to the economy of Bangladesh by way of remittances of foreign exchange earned by them.

Bangladesh today has 12% non-Muslims which is an important minority that a government cannot ignore. Besides this stretching Islamization too far might also strain its relations with India which at this stage Bangladesh cannot afford.

It is important however, to note that the apparently ineffective doses of Islamization may in the long run change the complexion of Bangladesh society and secular values may suffer in the process. The secular political culture could give way to a more religion oriented political culture.

But what exactly would be the future of Islamization in Bangladesh is still quite uncertain and to investigate that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The country till today hangs on a fine balance between religion and politics.

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