

Is Islam the antidote in Bangladesh?

President Ershad's latest political gambit may create more problems than it solves, writes Ramtanu Maitra from New Delhi.

On June 7, the Bangladesh parliament adopted a bill to amend the constitution, which states, "The State religion of the Republic shall be Islam, but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in the country." The bill was passed with 254 votes in favor and none opposed. The opposition, which consists of small parties since the major political parties refused to participate in last March's parliamentary elections, either voted for the amendment or walked out of the House in protest.

That Islam would be recognized as the state religion of Bangladesh was a foregone conclusion the moment President H.M. Ershad made known his intention to press the bill on March 13 of this year at a public gathering. The opposition in the parliament, since it controls less than 50 seats in a House of 300, had no muscle to stop it. The main opposition, which is busy demonstrating in the streets of Dhaka, has also been fragmented by its own contradictions and could do nothing to prevent the amendment from going through.

The significance of the move is not really religious, but rather an effort, buttressed by external factors, to realign the political forces in the country—and one which could put Bangladesh on a slippery political path.

Joining the Islamic fold

With adoption of the June 7 bill, Bangladesh joined the company of Iran, Egypt, Libya, Malaysia, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and eight other Muslim-majority nations where Islam has been proclaimed the state religion. Nations such as Indonesia, Afghanistan, Turkey, Sudan, and a few others have remained Muslim nations, but Islam has not been proclaimed the state religion.

Since Muslims make up close to 90% of Bangladesh's total population, making Islam the state religion will have little

though President Ershad will go down in history as the one who made Islam the state religion, the actual process started at least 11 years ago, when the late President Ziaur Rahman made it his major objective to raise Islam to the pre-eminent position it enjoyed when Bangladesh was still East Pakistan.

During Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's tenure as President (1971-75), Bangladesh was proclaimed a secular nation. In spite of the fact that Sheikh Mujib, as he was widely known, is considered the "father of the nation," his secular policies

did not endear him to many Bangladeshis. Soon after Sheikh Mujib's assassination by a section of the army in 1975, when Gen. Ziaur Rahman assumed power, Islam began to emerge as a political force. President Ziaur Rahman changed the nomenclature "Bengali" to "Bangladeshi" to eliminate linguistic nationalism, and incorporated the Islamic invocation, "Bismillahir Rahamanir Rahim," into the preamble of the constitution. He also replaced "secularism" with "Islamic justice" in the four state principles, the other three being "socialism," "democracy," and "nationalism." Bangladesh ceased to be a secular state in 1977, following President Ziaur Rahman's amendment of the constitution.

All of this is to underline the fact that the current bruhaha about Bangladesh adopting Islam as the state religion is largely mere sideshow. Behind the theatrics, President Ershad is attempting to use Islam to split the opposition and to gain support of the pro-Islam forces such as the Jamaat-i-Islami, Islami Oikya Andolon, Khilafat Andolon, Islamic Youth Front, and myriads of *pirs* (Sufi leaders) and *mullahs* who rule the roost in rural Bangladesh.

A newly formed "Islamic Constitution Movement," an amalgam of fanatics and fundamentalists, has already come to the fore in Dhaka where, every Friday after Jumma prayers, they go out and demonstrate in support of Islam. This group has also been involved in a number of clashes with the police during the past three months.

Spitting the opposition

Besides bringing the pro-Islam factions, a significant grouping in Bangladesh, into the body-politic, President Ershad has pretty much smashed any possibility of the extra-parliamentary opposition to combine against him. Sheikh Hasina Wazed, daughter of former President Mujibur Rahman and president of the Awami League, the largest party in Bangladesh, has reneged on her earlier one-point commitment to "oust Ershad." Instead, she is now planning to launch a fresh campaign against the Ershad regime for the restoration of the 1972 constitution, the four state principles, establishment of parliamentary democracy instead of the presidential system, and trial of the killers of Sheikh Mujib, who are roaming free and becoming more and more politically significant every day.

This new stance of Sheikh Hasina has been openly ridi-

culed by the other leading opposition leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of the late President Ziaur Rahman and president of the second largest political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). There never was any love lost between the two leaders and both distrust each other intensely. However, they had managed to combine their forces on the one-point program of "oust Ershad" for some time, with nominal successes. But the four new points raised by Sheikh Hasina conflict directly with the party philosophy of the BNP, which does not embrace "secularism," and believes in free economy

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and a presidential system. All these principles were laid down by President Ziaur Rahman. Moreover, Sheikh Hasina cannot forget that it was President Ziaur Rahman who allowed the killers of Sheikh Mujib to leave the country when they could have been brought to justice.

President Ershad may gloat that since the top opposition leaders will be busy feuding with each other, they won't bother his regime so much in the future. How serious the opposition's threat is, in any case, is debatable. The fact is that all the political parties—and there are hundreds of them in this tiny nation—are based in urban centers in a country where 84% of the population lives in rural areas, with almost no transportation and communication facilities to connect them with the cities. It is not surprising, therefore, that in spite of its daily demonstrations and protestations disrupting normal life in the urban centers, the opposition—with the combined strength of the BNP and Awami League—failed to prevent the general elections from being held this spring or to weaken President Ershad's presidency significantly.

The two Begums have other difficulties, too. Sheikh Hasina, for example has long foundered on the fact that she evokes the memory of her father's corrupt regime. Second, her own pro-India stances don't sit well in the minds of most Bangladeshis. While they understand that a harmonious relationship with India is a necessity, they consider Sheikh Hasina a mere stooge of India and therefore not acceptable. Curiously, she has not been able to shake off this negative image in all these years.

On the other hand, it is also widely believed in Bangladesh that Begum Khaleda Zia is in close collaboration with some of the military leaders close to the late President Ziaur Rahman. Recently, Sheikh Hasina slighted Begum Zia's democratic intentions by pointing out that Begum Zia still resides in the restricted area of Dhaka reserved for army personnel. Bangladeshis apprehend fearfully that bringing Begum Zia to power is tantamount to handing over power to the military. Moreover, Begum Zia's anti-India rhetoric is considered too dangerous by many.

Dangerous currents

Although the main opposition leaders have indeed been thrown into total disarray, the invocation of Islam to serve political purposes may have unforeseen consequences. It is no secret that Saudi Arabia has substantial clout in Bangladesh because of the large-scale aid it provides. The Saudi-built Baitul Mukarram mosque at the heart of Dhaka is a daily reminder of the Saudi presence. The Saudis have long been pressing for increased Islamization in Bangladesh, and otherwise involved themselves in the country's affairs. According to reports, the Saudis even arranged a meeting between Sheikh Hasina and President Ershad in Saudi Arabia at the time of the Hajj three years ago, to explore the grounds for reconciliation. It is evident that the Saudi aid will continue to flow now that Islam has been made the state religion.

But the new move will also give a green light to the fundamentalists. The Islamic Constitution Movement has become more active. At the same time, one of the killers of Sheikh Mujib, Col. Syed Farooq, has floated a political party and contested the presidential elections. Farooq's party has pledged to "fight for establishing Islamic rule in Bangladesh." According to Colonel Farooq, he has half a million members, and each and every cadre of the "grassroots party" would be ready for sacrifice in the cause of Islam and to help establish a "Koranic state" in Bangladesh. Reportedly, Farooq, who was in exile for 10 years in Libya before President Ershad sanctioned his return in 1985, now has several hundred Libyan-trained cadres in Bangladesh.

There is also widespread speculation that Colonel Farooq has established close liaison with BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia and with the Jamaat-i-Islami chief, Prof. Gholam Azam. Azam is a former leader of the East Pakistan Awami League who had his citizenship revoked in 1973 for collaboration with the Pakistani troops during the liberation war in 1971. He has been living in Bangladesh, however, since 1978, holding a Pakistani passport. Over the years, Azam has emerged as the de facto head of the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami.

On May 31, Deputy Prime Minister Dr. M.A. Matin, answering opposition charges on Professor Azam, admitted before the parliament that the professor is staying in Bangladesh illegally, and that the government has no intention of restoring his citizenship.