
Role of Religion in Bolstering State Power: Political Importance of Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh



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Abstract

The histories of Pakistan and Bangladesh are rife with the misuse of religion to bolster political power and gain legitimacy. Although it managed to confer temporary legitimacy that kept these regimes propped up, in the long run, the use of religion has only managed to weaken state power if defined in terms of the robustness of state institutions. While large scale Islamisation has been attempted in Pakistan, its history in Bangladesh has been largely tampered because of cultural constraints which give competing definitions of nationalism and state ideology. Even though religion has been used in myriad ways to confer legitimacy upon regimes and to prop them, it has not led to greater power of the state. The use of religion in this way, especially by dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, has only masked the tensions and problems that exist within the state apparatus and society while not doing much to strengthen democratic state institutions.

Keywords: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Islam, state power, Islamization, popular Islam, purist Islam, religious intolerance, extremism, political legitimacy, ideology, nationalism

Introduction

Religion in Pakistan and Bangladesh has certainly been used in attempts to bolster state power, especially as a means to gain legitimacy. Although it managed to confer temporary legitimacy that kept these regimes propped up, in the long run the use of religion has only managed to weaken state power if defined in terms of the robustness of state institutions. This is especially the case in Pakistan. The Islamization record in Bangladesh has remained checkered and

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more tempered than that attempted in Pakistan during various regimes. Understanding the contours of political importance of Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh entails an insight into various dimensions, first being its pre-Independence historical roots. Recently, changing socioeconomic factors and demographics have also resulted in greater political importance for religion. Finally, and very importantly, the political significance of Islam is due to the confluence of international forces, geostrategic factors and regional conflict. While examining each of these dimensions, the article juxtaposes Pakistan's experience with that of Bangladesh and tries to highlight some similarities and differences.

Popular Versus Purist Islam

To understand the political importance of Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, it is imperative to first understand the distinction between low vs. high Islam or popular vs. purist Islam. While Islam has had political importance as a manifestation of both these variants, their distinction is a big clue to understanding the growing tide of religious extremism and demands or attempts towards Islamization. Popular or Low Islam in its ideology is apolitical and is associated with khanqah/shrines of Sufi saints. In this sense, it is more of a cultural expression fused with local traditions, folklore, superstitions etc. practiced primarily in the rural areas. It is mainly associated with the Barelvi tradition, especially in Pakistan. On the other hand, what Riaz Hassan calls purist Islam, and which has been referred to as High Islam by others, is a religio-political ideology stemming mostly from Deobandi/Wahabbi movements and also the pre-Independence Faraizi Movement in Bengal. This Islam is the "strict, puritan, scripturalist religion of scholars." ¹While the former conception of religion could sit well with a secular ideology, the latter explicitly calls for the establishment of a theocracy.

The conception of Islam followed by the Pakistan movement was of the popular type. However, over the last two decades there has

been a marked shift towards the growing political importance of purist Islam. Riaz Hassan offers an explanation for this phenomenon in the Pakistani context by looking at the interaction of state-society dynamics. Even during colonial times, popular Islam was co-opted by the State. Since pirs (descendents of Sufi saints) had influence over millions of followers, the British felt it was in their interest to have their support. They were classified as 'landed gentry' and were bestowed with 'jagirs' (land grants) which "extended their influence to economic and political spheres" and consolidated their interests with other landed classes which led to a pir-zamindar alliance that gained great political significance. The support of this alliance was absolutely crucial for the success of the Pakistan Movement and actively sought to placate them later in post-Independence Pakistan where they became a dominant political class, as has also been argued by Hamza Alavi.² In this sense, not just the leaders of the Pakistan Movement but also the first few governments, all made concessions to popular Islam. For example, even Ayub Khan, notwithstanding the fact that he was a moderniser and sought to reduce the role of Islam in state functioning, still pandered to the popular Islamic forces by measures such as introduction of the Waqf Properties Ordinances of 1959 which institutionalised the control and management of shrines.³ Similarly, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also revived the idea of shrines as welfare centers. On the other hand, the proponents of purist Islam, i.e., the ulema tried to break the nexus between the state and popular Islam.

While popular Islam still remains politically significant in both Pakistan and Bangladesh and the landed pirs are still a force to be reckoned with in Pakistan, nonetheless there has been a shift towards purist interpretations and an increased importance of Islamic parties and religio-political groups. Writing in 1987, Riaz Hassan mentioned changing socio-economic circumstances such as urbanisation, increasing literacy and industrialisation which led to a shift towards the urban purist version of Islam and a greater role of Islamic political

parties. Till about three decades ago, purist Islam had largely remained concentrated in urban areas whereas popular Islam was more of a rural phenomenon, though still having widespread salience in the lives of the older urban generations, especially women. In recent years purist interpretations have made inroads into the rural areas. One of the most important reasons for this in both Pakistan and Bangladesh has been the return of Gulf migrants who have imported Wahabi political ideology back to their villages. Also, the Saudi government has also been directly funding Sunni religio-political groups and madrassas in these countries.

Use of Religion to Bolster State Power

The use of religion to bolster state power has been attempted in two ways. First, as the basis of nationalism and state ideology. It has been argued that religion was the very basis for the creation of these states. Granted that the leaders of the Pakistan Movement were not adhering to the idea of the creation of an 'Islamic State' and rather a 'State for Muslims' as authors such as Hamza Alavi⁴ have argued, it also remains a fact that their rallying cry was 'Islam in danger' and the basis of the two nation theory was in fact religious difference. This inevitably politicised religion, consequently creating conditions for its later manipulation by various opportunistic regimes, both civil or military. Especially in the Pakistani context, the entire idea of nationalism was linked to religion since there was really not much else in common to the areas that were grouped together as Pakistan. Since there was no such thing as a common 'Pakistani culture', though one could speak of Punjabi culture or Pathan culture etc, the political leaders had to espouse religion as state ideology and as the basis of nationalism. In this regard, the secession of East Pakistan to become Bangladesh was a defining moment in Pakistan's history. As Lawrence Ziring has argued, "the notion of an Islamic community and polity was significantly shaken by the creation of an independent Bangladesh."⁵ Thus, Zia

believed that just the concept of a modern nation state was not enough to unite Pakistanis, they rather required a unifying ideology which in the Pakistani context could best be provided only by Islam. No doubt the recourse to Islam was also to grant legitimacy to his government which had gained power through unconstitutional means and later as the best way of ensuring the continuity of his rule, the author holds that Zia genuinely believed that Islamic ideology was the best course of action for Pakistan in terms of developing a sense of nationhood. Above in view, the fact that instead of unifying the nation, the seeds of sectarianism were also sown during Zia's era which later festered and erupted in some of the worst types of violence that the country has seen, becomes and ironic undeniable reality.

On the other hand, in the case of Bangladesh, the sources of national identity were derived not just from religion but mainly from Bengali culture. Especially the independence struggle was "effectively a cultural resistance to the Pakistani regime." Thus, at the time of its creation in 1971, religion was not used as a basis for nationalism in Bangladesh. The Mujib ur-Rahman government espoused the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy and tried in very overt ways to secularise the State. Later, the failures, incompetence and corruption of the Mujib ur Rehman's regime led to a rejection of all that it espoused by the people, including secularism. In that sense, the rise of political Islam can be understood as a reactionary ideology, at least in the years Mujib ur Rehman's rule and led to a re-definition of nationalism in terms of Islam. The emphasis shifted from Bengali to Bangladeshi nationalism which was more overtly Islamic. However, the contradictory claims between Din-ul-Islam and Bangla Samaj (religion and culture) have not been resolved.

The second way in which religion bolstered state power is by conferring legitimacy to the State during times of economic, political or military crises and to prop up failing regimes, both civil and military. This has been especially true for military regimes that confiscated

power in an unconstitutional manner and thus lacked legitimacy, as has been mentioned for the case of Ayub Khan and Zia ul Haq in Pakistan. While Ayub was pandering to popular Islam, Zia, for the first time gave great leeway to Islamic religious parties espousing a purist version of Islam. The most important party amongst these is of course the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) which gained 'ideological hegemony' in the state during Zia's regime at the expense of popular Islamic tradition and its leaders. Similarly, both military rulers in Bangladesh also made recourse to religion to bolster their regimes. In 1976, Zia ur Rahman, like his namesake in Pakistan, deleted secularism from Bangladesh's Constitution and began a process of state-sponsored Islamisation. Zia "required an ideology to counter the official secularism of the Awami League and to undermine its still-considerable support. Islam offered an obvious and powerful alternative to win over right-wing Islamic elements who had been discredited by their Pakistan policies in 1971", especially the Jamaat-e-Islami which had supported Pakistan State and whose leader Ghulam Azam was later convicted in a 'people's court' on charges of war crimes in 1971 war and was awarded death penalty.⁶

However, it was not just military regimes that took recourse to religion to bolster their failing governments; this was also the case for almost all civilian regimes. For example, in the Pakistani context both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto tried to appease religious lobbies and built alliances with religious parties to gain political support. Nawaz Sharif, who is considered as a protégé of Zia ul Haq, carried on the Islamisation process initiated by his mentor, albeit in a muted manner. He introduced a Shariat Bill to deflect the attention away from the economic crisis that the country was in. Similarly, Benazir Bhutto, who "was viewed as a secular and lacked legitimacy" cinched an alliance with the Jamiat-i-Ulama-e-Islam or JUI, especially as a means of making inroads into the Sunni vote bank. In Bangladesh, the Awami League and BNP have had to use Islamic rhetoric and symbolism, especially during election time, in order to appease the religious sentiments of a

large section of society, despite their secular leanings. Outside of KPK in 2014, PTI joined forces with right-wing Islamist preacher Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri for orchestrating a mass sit-in in Islamabad. This prolonged sit-in demonstration, called the Azadi March (Freedom March) targeted the 'corrupt elite' and symbolically displayed PTI's willingness to form coalitions with Islamist right-wing groups.

It is noteworthy that while religion has been used in these myriad ways to confer legitimacy upon regimes and to prop them, it has not led to greater power of the state. The use of religion in this way, especially by dictatorial and authoritarian regimes such as that of Zia ul Haq, has only masked the tensions and the problems that exist within the state apparatus and in the society while not doing much to strengthen democratic state institutions. Such use of religion and suppression of popular political processes lets things fester under the surface which later erupt in hideous ways when given the opportunity. For example, the state links established with sectarian groups during Zia's time and later fostered during Benazir Bhutto's government (like the tacit alliance with Sipah-e-Muhammad) in later years resulted as a driving force behind the worst sectarian violence in the history of Pakistan.

Ascendancy of Political Islam due to International Factors

So far the explanation has largely focused on an analysis of state-society interaction. To understand the various dynamics at play in the ascendancy of political Islam in these two countries, it is absolutely crucial to look at international factors. Firstly the fact that the rise of political Islam is not an isolated phenomenon in Pakistan and Bangladesh needs to be emphasised. Worldwide, there has been a growing trend of Islamism premised as a set of political ideologies that view Islam not just as a religion but as a political system whose teachings should be eminent in all facets of society. The history of Islamism can be traced back to the 13th century, but its modern version

can be attributed to developments such as the end of Caliphate in 1924 and the consequent rise of the Khilafat movement, which was also very important for pre-independence Indian Muslims. Furthermore, various anti-colonial struggles such as in Egypt against the British or in Algeria against the French also used Islam for nationalist causes which later had ramifications regarding the role of religion in politics in these countries. Central figures of modern Islamism include Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Abul Ala Maududi, Sayyid Qutb and Ayatollah Khomeini.

While too much attention cannot be accorded to personalities in the explanation of such a complex phenomenon, one person that deserves a mention is Abu Ala Maududi. Maududi founded the Jamaat-e-Islami in 1941 and has had considerable influence in shaping political Islam in not just Pakistan and Bangladesh, but also in his influence over other organisations such as the Islamic Brotherhood. Maududi provided a blueprint for what an Islamic State should look like and the role of religion in state and politics. While his ideology is rather fundamentalist and traditionalist, it is simultaneously also modern in its outlook. For one, it accepts the nation state as the basis of the establishment of Islamic rule and democracy as the system of government. Furthermore, it accepts the use of modern education and technology for the continuance of its goals.

In the context of Bangladesh, the most important international factor that had an impact on the rise of religion in politics has been what has been termed 'Indiaphobia' by authors such as Taj ul-Islam Hashmi. There has been a pervasive insecurity in Bangladesh with regard to its neighbor that has led to further support for religious political parties that have adopted anti-India stance. Another underlying reason behind this is the fact that the Mujib government and Awami League were supported by India. Following the fall of the said government, the disillusionment of the people also led towards

hostility towards Indian and Bangladeshi Hindus and a turn towards Islamic political parties that offered an alternative.

Pakistan's insecurity towards India has also resulted in a turn towards religion, but in terms of the support of religio-political militant groups that have been fighting in Kashmir.⁷ While militant Islamic groups have been operating in Kashmir with the alleged tacit support of the Pakistani state, the growing importance of religio-political groups really became pronounced as a consequence of regional conflicts which eventually led to a militarisation of the society. In this regard, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 had the effect of mobilising and politicising the Shias in Pakistan. To counter their growing influence, Zia's regime adopted a strategy of supporting Sunni sectarian groups. Similarly the Soviet-Afghan war which began in 1980 brought much funding, military training and institutional support for various militant religio-political groups in Pakistan. Although, these militant groups are not active in the formal political arena and must be distinguished from the religious parties nevertheless, there exists a 'symbiotic relationship' between them (Kukreja, 183)⁸ in the sense that the political parties have fostered linkages with them to serve as their extended militant arms. Similarly, the religio-political groups also benefit from their links with these parties (as also with the military and the ISI) in order to bail them out when they run into trouble with the law because of their criminal activities.

Conclusion

While large scale Islamisation has been attempted in Pakistan, its history in Bangladesh has been largely tempered because of cultural constraints which offers competing definitions of nationalism and state ideology. However, this is not to say that political Islam in Bangladesh, especially the constant battles between the Jamaat's militant student wings and secular forces, have not had negative repercussions for the Bangladeshi state and society. Overall it can be

contended that while attempts have been made to bolster religion through the use of state power, by both civil and military regimes seeking legitimacy and defining state ideology and nationalism, in the long run this has only resulted in the weakening of the state by unleashing the forces of religious intolerance, extremism, terrorism and sectarianism which have taken very violent forms in recent years.

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