

The Language of Youth Politics in Bangladesh: Beyond the Secular-Religious Binary

Mubashar Hasan, PhD

Executive Summary

Debates over the role of religion in public life have defined the history of Bangladesh since its independence in 1971. The recent spike in political violence across the country, however, signals a turning point in a decades-long struggle between those who consider the state to be secular and those who consider the majority-Muslim country to be associated with the principles of Islam. This conflict exceeds mainstream political differences; extremists exploit it to justify violence against minorities, outspoken critics, nonconformists, and foreigners.

In this context, and despite clear constitutional guarantees regarding basic freedoms and fundamental rights, daily battles are being waged around minority rights and freedom of speech. As these debates continue, the boundaries for open cultural and artistic expression are shrinking. Muslims have their own internal differences about what makes someone pious, how religiosity should be expressed in matters of dress, how public space should be shared between the sexes, and what the role of education might be in shaping national identity. All of these differences point to a fraying of the social fabric with clear implications for those seeking to contain and confront violent extremism.

The rights of minorities are protected under the 1972 constitution. Nevertheless, Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus are increasingly subordinating both their public and private religious practices to the sensitivities of Bangladesh's Muslim majority. Freedom of conscience is further restricted because some in the Muslim community view atheism as an affront to Islam and the sanctity of a Muslim-majority state. Muslim conservatives are particularly concerned about trends within the mainstream media that they regard as hostile to their perspective and

KEY FINDINGS

- There is a growing intra-religious divide between Bangladeshi Muslims over competing claims of piety that appears to fuel religious frictions and heightened social intolerance.
- Social polarization over religious values affects nearly every facet of life in Bangladesh, drawing especially sharp lines over cultural and artistic expression.
- Growing intolerance and frictions over religious pluralism are shrinking the space for open debate, freedom of conscience and speech, and public expressions of dissent.
- Increased polarization around religious values and secularism raises the risks that extremists will exploit divisions to escalate their campaign of targeted violence.
- Universities have emerged as a key battleground as tensions over religious and political content in higher education curricula have grown.

unfair in their portrayal of all those with a religious education as intolerant or extremist. In this highly charged atmosphere, public expressions of Bengali nationalism have been targeted as “un-Islamic” and subject to political attack. Inter- and intra-religious frictions have sparked a growing culture of self-censorship.

Ongoing debates surrounding competing claims of piety have widened the gulf between those described as “good” and “bad” Muslims. Rock music was once seen as a progressive political force in Bangladesh that criticized authoritarianism, corruption, and religious extremism. However, many young people under the influence of Internet videos and Bangla-language Islamic books have come to regard music as “un-Islamic.” In some cases, their focus on locating a more “correct” religious path has aligned them with some of the radical preachers who are said to have inspired recent attacks.

What young people wear is perceived as a fault line of piety, but there is a perception that this dynamic works differently for men and women. Women are increasingly wearing the hijab, but traditional Islamic attire worn by men is often criticized as a marker of intolerance or narrow-mindedness. Amid these differences, young Bangladeshis have been pushing back against the view, spread by more conservative and radical Islamic groups, that men and women should not mix together in public. In this context, both progressive and conservative Muslims view the education system, particularly at the university level, as a place to counter extremism by revising existing curricula.

Understanding shifting trends in the country’s conflicts over conscience, religious identity, citizenship, and freedom of expression is vital for those with an interest in shaping more effective policies to counter violent extremism. Interventions that rely on deploying alternative narratives need to examine the growing body of evidence documenting a rapidly shifting socioeconomic landscape in Bangladesh. The research underpinning this research brief suggests four ways to improve policy responses to extremism:

- Engage, do not ignore, Muslim conservatives when crafting policy responses.
- Defend the values of diversity, democracy, and secularism.
- Support displays of, and the opportunity for, public cultural expression.
- Broaden university curricula to counter extremist ideologies.

In each of these four areas, a better understanding of the religious and ideological narratives prevailing among Bangladeshi youth is critical. This understanding is necessary to mitigate the risks of growing social intolerance and blunt the appeal of violent extremist views.

Introduction

Bangladesh has a history of political violence dating back to its struggle for independence. Recent terrorist attacks, however, have led to a reassessment of the conventional wisdom about what drives this violence, with a greater focus on trends in the political environment.¹ The RESOLVE Network is working to deepen the study of these factors, particularly how they are shaped by the country's history and emerging socioeconomic changes rooted in globalization.²

Understanding how increasing polarization and societal divisions have shaped social strife is important to understanding the nature of political violence in Bangladesh. The Constitution of Bangladesh, written the year following independence in 1971, defined the country's secular nationalism but named Islam as the state religion.³ In the past four and a half decades, the political culture has evolved to favor Islam over secularism.⁴ Debates about political secularism, Islam, and the relative prominence of each are a constant feature of public life. Islamists and conservative civil society groups have campaigned for the state-based enforcement of *sharia*.⁵ Secular nationalist groups have campaigned for policies modeled on *laïcité*, the French concept of secularism.⁶ The result has been strong disagreement over the character of the Bangladeshi state on a constitutional, political, and bureaucratic level as well as among Bangladeshi citizens.

Bangladesh faces a profound youth bulge — 30 percent of its population is between the ages of 10 and 24 — as well as intensifying economic hardship and political inequality.⁷ Unemployment among university graduates is extremely high; a 2014 report found that nearly 50 percent of graduates were unemployed.⁸ During the past decade, there has been intensifying political centralization as the ruling Awami League has strengthened its grip on state institutions. Some believe that the Awami League has used its power to benefit supporters and persecute opponents, especially those associated with the Bangladesh National Party and its occasional Islamist ally, the Jama'at-e-Islami.⁹

¹ Matthew Nelson and Seth Oldmixon, "Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence." RESOLVE Network, *Bangladesh Research Report* No. 1, September, 2017.

² RESOLVE Network Secretariat, "The Governance Nexus: Surveying the Research on Violent Extremism, Governance Failures, and the Quest for Political Legitimacy." RESOLVE Network *Working Paper Series* 1, No. 3, June, 2017.

³ Section 2A states: "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic." See also Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 12.

⁴ Maneeza Hossain, "The Rising Tide of Islamism in Bangladesh," 67–77.

⁵ By "Islamist," we refer to activists of a religious political party; these activists may use moderate, radical, and extreme methods to realize their ambitions. For example, see Mohammad Rashiduzzaman, "The Liberals and the Religious Right in Bangladesh," *Asian Survey* 34, (1994), 974-90.

⁶ Habibul Khondker, "The Curious Case of Secularism in Bangladesh: What is the Relevance for the Muslim Majority Democracies?" *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11, (2010), 185-20.

⁷ Jyoti Rahman, "Bangladesh's Demographic 'Youth Bulge' — Is a 'Revolution' in Progress?" *Alochonaa*, March 15, 2014; "Rise of Youth," *The Daily Star*, November 19, 2014.

⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit, "High University Enrolment, Low Graduate Employment: Analyzing the Paradox in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka," January 2014.

⁹ "Controlled Democracy: Bangladesh," *The Economist*, February 15, 2017.

Bangladeshi Muslim youth remain sharply divided in matters of faith. In 2013, these divisions played out on the streets of Dhaka in rival social movements: the secular Shahbagh movement and the conservative Hefazat-e-Islam (Protection of Islam) movement.¹⁰ Within this polarizing context, five young Bangladeshi men armed with blades, guns, and bombs stormed the Holey Artisan Bakery in an upscale Dhaka neighborhood of Gulshan in July 2016, killing twenty-two people, including eighteen foreigners.¹¹ This attack was the largest in an anti-secular campaign spearheaded by violent extremists, now associated with more than forty killings, including attacks on secular bloggers alleged to be atheists, a US embassy employee involved in gay rights activism, and Sufi Muslims seeking to reject an overly rigid interpretation of Islam.¹² Since 2016, Bangladeshi law enforcement officials have arrested or killed several youth accused of terrorism. Secular youth and conservative Muslim scholars have publicly denounced terrorist attacks committed in the name of Islam, but condemnation has neither been uniform nor universal across the wider public.¹³

Tapping into these trends, this research brief is one in a series on Bangladesh and examines public views on the role of religion in public life. Informed by key stakeholder interviews conducted in Dhaka during May and June 2017, a literature review, and workshops sponsored by the RESOLVE Network and its partners in Bangladesh, the analysis in this brief explores how youth perceive the parameters of Islam in public life. It takes stock of their opinions about minority rights, on what is and is not “Islamic,” and on religious and secular concepts. Findings from this inquiry illuminate key narratives and concepts that should be integrated into policy responses to violent extremism in Bangladesh. Such integration will especially benefit those interventions that seek to shape the media environment, cultivating counter or alternative messaging capable of addressing and mitigating dangerous social schisms.

¹⁰ “4 Years since the Shahbagh Movement,” *Dhaka Tribune*, February 6, 2017; Julien Bouissou, “Bangladesh’s Radical Muslims Uniting behind Hefazat-e-Islam,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2013.

¹¹ Mubashar Hasan, “Threats of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh Are a Symptom of Deeper Social and Political Problems,” *The Conversation*, January 11, 2017.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ “Students in Bangladesh Protest Rise of Islamic Extremism,” *Fox News*, August 1, 2016; Maaz Hussain, “Anti-Terror Fatwa Endorsed by 100,000 Bangladeshi Islamic Scholars,” *Voice of America*, June 21, 2016.

Boundaries Between Secularism and Religion

SUBORDINATING MINORITY RIGHTS

Contrary to conventional wisdom, secularism in Bangladesh is not divorced from religion. Instead, the youth interviewed for this research insisted that religious practice sets the framework for Bangladeshi secularism. The boundaries of pluralism are limited by a majoritarian commitment to the supremacy of Islam. One Hindu told of his experience in his home district of Narshindi, fifty kilometers northeast of Dhaka, where Hindus were compelled to reduce the volume of their temple loudspeakers during a religious festival because it overlapped with an Islamic preaching session.¹⁴

Those from religious minorities often spoke of their subordination to majoritarian notions of religious liberty. A female Hindu student living in a suburban Dhaka flat with six other women noted that her Muslim roommate, whom she described as “liberal,” from a non-Islamic educational background, and prone to skipping prayers, had removed a Hindu idol from their shared room because she believed it would undermine any Muslim prayer she might have chosen to perform. “My roommate is busy with the dignity of her own religion, but she does not think of mine,” the Hindu student complained. “She has no respect; she considers my Hindu statue merely a doll!” Despite her strong sense of grievance, however, she felt obliged to accommodate the views of her Muslim roommate.¹⁵

When these minority concerns were shared with Muslims, most were unconcerned. They saw this attitude as normal and believed that the protection of majority values was common in democracies around the world. As one leader of the Hefazat-e-Islam movement explained, “Idol-worshippers can place their idols in their private places and in their *mandirs*” — their Hindu temples. He added that Islam instructed its followers to protect the houses of worship of other religions.¹⁶ Other young Muslims interviewed also saw protecting minority religious practices as part of their Islamic faith. At the same time, however, they expected religious minorities to defer to majority sentiments. As one madrasa graduate said, “I see no problem with this bias toward Islam.”¹⁷ In some interviews, secularism was a democratic value associated with religious pluralism; however, secularism was not seen as incompatible with prevailing forms of religious majority rule. This understanding of majority rule was often framed in terms of the historical flexibility associated with Islamic notions of *ijma*, that is the shifting forms of internal Muslim consensus wrought by Islamic legal scholars.

This focus on majoritarian religious freedom, however, risks depriving non-Muslim citizens of their equal status *vis-à-vis* Muslims. It directly contradicts Sections 11 and 12 of the Bangladeshi Constitution, which are designed to protect the dignity of every citizen

¹⁴ Interview, male Hindu youth, Dhaka, May 19, 2017.

¹⁵ Interview, female Hindu student, Dhaka, May 19, 2017.

¹⁶ Interview, male Muslim activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

¹⁷ Interview, male Madrasa student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

and prohibit discrimination against any religion.¹⁸ The double standard could create scope for extremists to manipulate such discriminatory views, moving beyond a positive bias toward Islam in order to justify the killing of infidels, a worldview that surfaced in recent terrorist attacks in Dhaka.¹⁹

CONSTRAINING FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND SPEECH

There was a consensus among the Muslims interviewed that atheism is an offense to Islam. Whether they described themselves as progressive or conservative, Muslim respondents believed that secularism should be controlled to ensure that no offense to their religion was committed. Although both groups felt that offending Muslim or Islamic sentiments was wrong, their reasons differed slightly.

Progressive Muslims adopted a politically cautious approach to the relationship between religion and freedom of speech. They noted that, to sustain popular support for progressive causes like religious pluralism and the right to religious dissent in a context characterized by increasing religiosity, it was politically sensible to avoid any criticism of the majority religion “in the name of being progressive.” When a few bloggers were said to have demeaned the Prophet and his followers in the name of atheism, progressive Muslim respondents felt that the idea of atheism had been diminished. A top leader of a prominent secular forum said, “I can’t proclaim myself [to be] an atheist these days. My movement includes religious people too, and they would not approve of my stance. Atheism has acquired a bad name due to the irresponsible actions of certain people.”²⁰

Self-censorship has become increasingly widespread among progressives in response to the social disapproval surrounding certain atheist blog posts. This politically cautious mindset is seen by some as impinging on public debate and free speech. It accentuates a trend in which atheism is framed as a personal stance that offends the Muslim majority. With the perceived social influence of the majority, atheism has come to be viewed, even by many progressive Muslims, as a stance that could begin to threaten the survival of constitutional secularism. One journalist, who appears regularly on prime-time television talk shows, accused atheist bloggers of damaging the credibility of secularism. In an interview, he said, “Atheists have made the concept of secularism problematic by initiating offensive writings against Islam, as a result of which, most religious Bangladeshis, who also believe in religious harmony, have developed a distaste about these two words: secularism and atheism.”²¹

Some citizens who typically identify themselves as religiously progressive have come to believe that certain forms of free speech are increasingly restricted. One leftist student leader said he recently had to revise the content of a public speech because his approach to religion faced growing scrutiny. This self-censorship brings progressives much closer to the

¹⁸ Section 11 states: “The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed”; Section 12(d) states: “The principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.”

¹⁹ Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Uses Ramadan as Calling for New Terrorist Attacks,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016.

²⁰ Interview, male nongovernmental organization activist, Dhaka, May 8, 2017.

²¹ Interview, mainstream journalist, Dhaka, May 27, 2017.

views of conservative Muslims, at least in public. However, it risks diluting constitutional and democratic norms by stressing the supremacy of Islam as the majority religion to the exclusion of minority values and rights as well as the need to protect Islam from perceived cultural and theological incursions. “Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, so there is no scope for offending Islam; this is non-negotiable,” said one madrassa student.²² In fact, a leader associated with Hefazat-e-Islam added, referring to secular bloggers, “Their freedom of speech is [only] okay until they attack Islam; one cannot [diminish] Muslims’ freedom to practice religion with an appeal to freedom of speech.”²³

On the other side of the debate, conservative Muslims were highly critical of what they saw as biased media representation of what constitutes free speech. “Whenever we see the unfortunate killing of an atheist person, it is a general trend that the participants on TV talk shows and the content of the news point to madrassa education as a source of the problem,” said one madrassa student.²⁴ Imbalances in the reporting and commentary of Bangladeshi television news programs have not gone unnoticed by local researchers.²⁵ The polarization of the media often pits religious madrassas against secular bloggers. Media coverage has exacerbated and distorted cleavages, transforming many conservative Muslims who might otherwise condemn extremism into possible suspects. Those with a madrassa education felt aggrieved because when a student educated in a mainstream school was implicated in violence, their school was not immediately blamed for their acts. Many conservative Muslims interviewed considered the portrayal of madrassas as sources of intolerance and radicalism to be inaccurate and misleading.

SHRINKING BOUNDARIES OF CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Public forms of cultural and artistic expression have long served to delineate the boundaries of secular and religious space in Bangladesh. As this research brief was being prepared, public debate was dominated by efforts to remove a statue depicting a Greek goddess from the front of the Supreme Court building.²⁶ At about the same time, conservative Hefazat-e-Islam activists demanded an end to *Mongol Shovajatra* (a procession of good wishes) celebrating the Bengali New Year (*Pohela Boishakh*), calling it “un-Islamic.” The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognized this celebration as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Every year, Dhaka University’s Fine Arts Institute holds the iconic procession featuring super-sized replicas of birds, owls, fish, animals, and other motifs. In response to demands from

²² Interview, Madrassa student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

²³ Interview, male Islamic activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

²⁴ Interview, Madrassa student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

²⁵ Sheikh Mohammad Shafiqul Islam, “Coverage Bias of Bangladesh Television Media: A Portrayal of Power and Politics,” *Malaysian Journal of Communication* 32 (2), (2016), 240-58; Syed Saad Andaleeb and Anis Rahman, “Television News in Bangladesh: Intersection of Market-oriented Journalism and Perceived Credibility,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 25 (2), (2015), 162-77.

²⁶ Julfikar Ali Manik and Ellen Barry, “Statue of Woman Removed from Bangladesh’s Supreme Court,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2017.

Hefazat-e-Islam, the ruling Awami League decided not to participate in the procession in 2017 — an unprecedented gesture of appeasement.²⁷

Since independence, there has been a tension between a “Bengali” nationalism defined by language and culture, on the one hand, and a “Bangladeshi” nationalism defined by religion and territory, on the other.²⁸ The sculptures and festivals are the most recent battleground for this struggle concerning national identity. Conservative Muslims want “non-Muslim” symbols to be removed from the public sphere. Less conservative Muslims generally disagree, arguing that religion is a matter of private spirituality so there is no harm in celebrating religious diversity within the public sphere. Most of the progressive Muslim youth interviewed as part of this research argued that *Mongol Shovajatra* represented a form of humanist Bengali culture. Still, conservatives insisted that the symbols used in the processions were drawn from Hindu and not Bengali Muslim culture. One conservative interlocutor added that, while some Hindus are also Bengali, they cannot impose Bengali processions on Muslim-majority Bengalis. The idea of Muslim majoritarianism and the need to protect it from minority cultures consistently framed conservative views regarding the special status of Islam.

Symbols were often used to mark the boundary between a stronger Muslim majority culture and a weaker non-Muslim or secular minority culture. Despite the political predominance of the Awami League, conventional notions of secularism and religious neutrality were not observed as a part of majority youth culture. While supporting the removal of the Greek statue in front of the Supreme Court, for instance, a conservative Hefazat-e-Islam leader repeatedly made connections between the statue’s symbolic connotation of “secular justice” and Christianity: “The state cannot impose the symbols of the Christian religion on our Muslim majority.”²⁹ Progressive Muslims considered the removal of the Greek statue and the Awami League’s withdrawal from *Mongol Shovajatra* as symptoms of a pandering to Islamist sentiment and the shrinking space for public religious neutrality.³⁰

²⁷ “No Mongol Shobhajatra by Awami League This Year,” *Dhaka Tribune*, April 13, 2017.

²⁸ For more on this topic, see: Tanveer Fazal, “Religion and Language in the Formation of Nationhood in Pakistan and Bangladesh,” in *Nation and National Identity in South Asia*, ed. by S.L. Sharma and T. K Ommen (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 175-200.

²⁹ Interview, male Islamic activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

³⁰ Ikhtisad Ahmed, “Three More Signs That Bangladesh’s Ruling Awami League Has Tightened Its Embrace of Islamism,” *Scroll.in*, April 28, 2017.

Differences Among Muslims

MUSIC AS A DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN “GOOD” AND “BAD” MUSLIMS

Culture is a battleground, not only between Muslims and minorities in Bangladesh, but also among adherents of Islam. Attitudes toward music often serve as a dividing line between progressive and conservative Muslim attitudes. Many of the Bangladeshi Muslims interviewed treated rock-and-roll music as a form of un-Islamic art. Although no Qur’anic verse forbids music, those interviewed expressed the belief that musicians challenged its teachings. Even a student who played drums in a local rock band felt that he was involved in an “un-Islamic” activity; he said his religion prohibited playing musical instruments that created a sense of excitement. His band membership even produced conflict within his family: “My parents are very conservative,” he said. “They think Allah will not listen to the prayers of a musician, but even so, I carry on (with guilty feelings).”³¹ These views reflect a commonly shared understanding sourced from the Internet — a go-to source for religious teaching — as well as Bengali-language Islamic texts found in local markets.

Rock music used to be seen as a progressive cultural and political force in Bangladesh. During the 1990s, the influence of western rock on Bangla rock was clear; some Bangladeshi musicians sported long hair and dressed in jeans, high-boots, and black T-shirts, supporting religious tolerance, democracy, and Sufi Islam. These musicians explicitly criticized authoritarianism, rampant corruption, and Wahhabi extremism. Without being anti-Islamic, these youth were at the forefront of changing social values.³² With increasing religiosity, however, the boundaries have changed. Many parents forbid their children from engaging in music, especially “satanic” rock-and-roll, which is seen as outside of Islam.³³ Thus, music has in some cases abandoned its progressive history to become a moral marker distinguishing “good” from “bad” Muslims.

Bangladeshi young people are now more focused on interpreting the correct path of Islam than on following the latest musical trends. Much attention has been paid to the case of Maher Khan, the former guitarist of a local rock band called *Nemesi*. In a 2013 video, Khan explained why he quit the band, saying that playing music and offering prayers to Allah were contradictory, because music distracts the mind from Allah.³⁴ Khan explained that it was difficult to give up music because it was close to his heart, but he was able to do it for the love of Allah once he married a religious girl. Many of the young people interviewed shared similar views, explaining how they had shifted their attention away from enjoying popular music to finding the “correct” path of Islam. One woman reported that, when her brother started following radical preachers and joining Hefazat-e-Islam protests, he gave up listening to music.³⁵ The argument made by Maher Khan was similar to one made online in a widely accessed video by the Salafi preacher Zakir Naik, who is

³¹ Interview, male rock-band drummer, Dhaka, May 30, 2017.

³² Mubashar Hasan, “Globalisation in Bangladesh: The School of Rock and the Soldiers of God,” *The Daily Star*, June 6, 2011.

³³ Mubashar Hasan, “Rock-n-Roll: Social Change and Democratization in Bangladesh,” *South Asia @ LSE*, December 4, 2015.

³⁴ “Guidance: The Maher Khan Story,” *YouTube*, April 11, 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftD8X1mHPYI.

³⁵ Interview, family member of a late radical activist, Dhaka, May 27, 2017.

said to have influenced those involved in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack.³⁶ The fact that Naik’s PeaceTV broadcasts were suspended in Bangladesh shortly after the attacks only underscores emerging concerns regarding the powerful popular appeal of conservative social views.

Access to satellite television, the Internet, social media, and new apps have accelerated the trend towards religiosity among young people in Bangladesh. During the 1980s and 1990s, the arrival of satellite television and the Internet also coincided with the expansion of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Some Middle Eastern NGOs such as Green Crescent and Rabita al-Alam al-Islami came to the country stressing a rigid interpretation of Islam.³⁷ Compared to Sufism, democracy, and rock-and-roll during the 1990s, Salafi Islam has become increasingly influential over time. The widespread availability of Qur’an apps and religious YouTube videos produced by those described as more “authentic” Middle Eastern Muslims has been instrumental in generating sympathy for the growing influence of Salafism and Saudi-style Wahhabism.

PIETY AND PROGRESSIVES: FASHION AS FAULT LINE

Fashion choice is another fault line between progressive and conservative Muslim youth in Bangladesh. A recurring theme emerged in the interviews regarding the hijab or headscarf, which most respondents agree is increasingly worn by young women. One woman noted that, when her brother was radicalized and started associating with Hefazate-Islam, he forced her to wear the hijab.³⁸ To progressives, this represents a move away from the traditional South Asian sari in favor of new forms of conservative Muslim dress. Among those wearing the hijab, however, there were sharp disagreements regarding the right way to wear it, with many linking different styles of hijab to a distinction between “good” and “bad” female Muslims. “Islam is a strict religion, so if anyone wants to wear hijab for religious reasons, they should not wear it with a T-shirt, jeans, or tight-fitting dresses,” noted one hijab-wearing interviewee, adding that women who did not wear a hijab were regarded as not religious or not truly following Islam.³⁹ Progressives, including women who did not cover their hair, however, stressed the importance of individual choice and not judging the religiosity of others. Hijab-wearing interviewees dismissed such views, arguing that religious instructions favoring the hijab were clear, indicating that Islam provided no space for negotiation. This dispute was not simply sartorial; it also illuminated different progressive and conservative opinions regarding the legitimacy of holding opposing views. Intolerance towards the views of others, interviews revealed, is commonplace within the ranks of some Bangladeshi Muslim youth.

³⁶ “If Listening to Music is Haram, Then Where Is It Stated in Holy Quran?” Dr. Zakir Naik (Urdu), *You Tube*, April 26, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZXLOcQ-LYA.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview, family member of late radical activist, Dhaka, May 27, 2017.

³⁹ Interview, female student, Dhaka, May 30, 2017.

CLOTHING AS A MAKER OF STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES

The conservative shift in Muslim social norms is having an impact on perceptions regarding clothing across Bangladeshi society. One non-Muslim woman interviewed for this study said she had begun to wear a hijab only after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in the hope that she might be spared in any future attack. A young male who studied in a madrassa and wore a beard and traditional South Asian Muslim clothing, including a *Punjabi kameez* (knee-length tunic) and a *tupi* (cap), felt that he had become more socially isolated due to his religious appearance. “In public buses, people are reluctant to sit beside me,” he complained.⁴⁰ The negative image associated with some religious clothing has, in some cases, contributed to social segregation. Many young male interviewees said they would respond negatively if a friend wore stereotypical forms of Muslim clothing, because such men were regarded as dogmatic and socially rigid.⁴¹ Non-Muslims perceived these men as intolerant to minorities. Unlike the hijab, male religious clothing, was not seen as a source of social assimilation but as an act of self-isolation from mainstream Muslim society. This negative perception was seen as contributing to fewer men wearing stereotypical Muslim clothing, whereas most of those interviewed agreed that the opposite trend had emerged among Muslim women.

SOCIAL CONTACT BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

Mixed-gender interaction is not automatically seen as un-Islamic among educated youth in Bangladesh. While Hefazat-e-Islam in 2013 demanded a formal legal ban on unmarried mixed couples in public, the youth interviewed for this study did not seem to support such a move.⁴² One respondent recalled that a conservative Dhaka University Facebook group had recently criticized a man for publicly hugging a woman on campus, as this was seen as a “threat to the religious ethics of the country.”⁴³ Another argued that “free mixing” merely expanded the space for unethical and anti-religious activities, referring to a widely reported case of rape in Dhaka’s Raintree Hotel. It was suggested that such crimes were the inevitable consequence of free mixing. Many of the young Muslims who participated in this research, however, opposed these views and insisted that Muslim men and women should interact in a context of mutual respect. Although divergent views regarding mixed-gender interaction are frequently cited as a source of social, religious, and political cleavage in Muslim communities, research conducted for this brief revealed a rather unexpected consensus instead.

⁴⁰ Interview, male Muslim student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

⁴¹ Interviews, male Muslim university students, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

⁴² Julien Bouissou, “Bangladesh’s Radical Muslims Uniting behind Hefazat-e-Islam,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2013.

⁴³ Interview, university student, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

EDUCATION AND EXTREMISM

The young Bangladeshi Muslims interviewed for this study consistently denounced violent extremism in the name of Islam. Conservatives expressed the belief that violent extremism was antithetical to Islam. They cited the leader of Hefazat-e-Islam, who repeated a familiar Qur'anic phrase that "killing one human being unjustly is like killing the entirety of humankind." One interviewee added, "Those who kill in the name of Islam do not know Islam."⁴⁴ These young Muslims felt it was important to distance themselves from violent extremists both to protect the reputation of Islam and to shield fellow Muslims from the possibility of retaliatory attacks.

Bangladesh's divergent education system, in which students can be taught either in Bangla or English as the primary language of instruction and, for those who choose, in regulated and unregulated Islamic schooling, also complicates matters. One interviewee stressed the need for active government intervention to streamline the many different types of education in Bangladesh. "The country will eventually fall into a civil war, as our diverse educational system is creating citizens with radically different points of view," he said.⁴⁵ Integrated educational curricula, he argued, should be seen as an essential part of any effort to address this this pattern of social segregation.

At the same time, however, many of the secular Muslims interviewed for this study felt that religious education should be removed from existing curricula, starting at the primary-school level. At the university-level, they noted that critical-thinking subjects like history, philosophy, political science, and art should be considered mandatory for engineering and business students. This conviction was based on a perception that engineering and business courses often failed to provide a nuanced understanding of social dynamics. This black-and-white orientation, they argued, led to closed-minded forms of religiosity that made these students more susceptible to appeals from militant outfits.

Conservative Muslims, however, countered that in order to reduce extremism Islam should be taught all the way from the primary to the tertiary level, noting that many of those arrested for violent extremism offenses were from non-religious educational backgrounds. Conservative interviewees insisted that, among Muslims with a proper understanding of Islam, terrorism was not regarded as a legitimate response to cultural or political frictions. For a Muslim-majority country, they added, Islamizing the school curricula was merely a part of their patriotic duty.

⁴⁴ Interview, Islamic activist, Dhaka, May 9, 2017.

⁴⁵ Interview, journalist, Dhaka, May 16, 2017.

Observations and Areas for Future Research

The views expressed by the Bangladeshi youth interviewed for this research brief illuminated four specific policy implications for the consideration of the government and international donors seeking to address violent extremism.

ENGAGING RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES

For many Bangladeshis, conservative Muslims enjoy greater credibility in matters related to Islam. At the same time, conservatives interviewed for this study made numerous cogent arguments against violent religious extremism. It appears that conservative Muslims may be willing and able to play a more active role in countering violent extremism. It is important that the Bangladeshi government and international donors are careful not to stigmatize or marginalize conservative Muslims: they may be important allies.

DEFENDING DIVERSITY, DEMOCRACY, AND SECULARISM

It is important that the Bangladeshi state maintain its support for secular constitutional principles to prevent a further shrinking of the public space for pluralism and minority religious or non-religious rights. The government and its international partners need to work to protect a diverse and democratic public sphere. Shrinking space for political expression threatens to create an ideological and political vacuum, pushing dissent underground and making those outside the mainstream vulnerable to extremist exploitation. The state needs to protect legitimate forms of opposition while cultivating institutionalized spaces for young Bangladeshi participation. A starting point could involve allowing elections for the student unions of many public-sector universities.

PROTECTING CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Artistic and cultural expression needs to be protected from those who seek to limit what they see as offensive or “un-Islamic” forms of speech. It is important that the state work with Muslim and non-Muslim leaders to stress its neutrality in matters of religious, cultural, and political expression. The active protection of free speech as described in law can help to mitigate forms of self-censorship resulting from a fear of vigilante violence.

At the same time, mainstream Bangladeshi media need to be careful not to conflate Muslim conservatism with extremism. Demonizing conservative Muslims reduces the media’s credibility with the wider population, minimizes the role that mainstream media could play in public debate, and pushes citizens to online sources of information. Engagement with extremist social media in Bangladesh has the potential to increase. Online forums such as Facebook and religious blogs are growing increasingly popular for those with an interest in expressing religious views and engaging in religious dialogue. Enhanced understanding of broadcast and online media is particularly important for those

seeking to inform culturally-appropriate messaging campaigns to counter and prevent violent extremism.

BROADENING UNIVERSITY CURRICULA

Some private universities have started to diversify their curricula and make liberal education mandatory for all students. It would also be worthwhile for all universities to require studies that combine accessible forms of high-level religious instruction with an awareness of politics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and world history.⁴⁶ This approach could make it harder for extremist recruiters to attract students with their simplistic narratives of religion, world history, and politics.

⁴⁶ See also Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Conclusions

This exploratory research shows how Bangladeshi youth draw conceptual, social, and political boundaries with respect to religion. The narratives presented illuminate some of the deeper meanings surrounding politically charged vocabularies in Bangladesh, focusing on such concepts as secularism, religion, and extremism. Understanding these narratives and the effects they have within society at large is a crucial first step in the development of effective policies and practices seeking to stem the expansion of violent extremism.

The findings from the research highlight the importance of shaping policy responses that engage conservative Muslims; uphold the values of diversity, democracy, and secularism; protect cultural expression; and broaden university curricula in ways that counter and ultimately prevent violent extremism. The findings also suggest important trends to monitor in future research, including how youth define “good” or “bad” Muslims, which ideas promote (and counter) the increasing polarization of Bangladeshi society, and how expanding use of the Internet influences the exchange of ideas and extremist narratives.

For policymakers and practitioners, attention to the role that narratives surrounding religion, secularism, and public life play in fostering or mitigating social polarization and violent extremism is critical. The extent to which alternative narrative campaigns are effective depends, in large part, on the degree to which they are informed by rigorous research and insight into the views driving existing schisms within Bangladesh today.

About the Author

The primary author of this report was Dr. Mubashar Hasan, PhD, a RESOLVE Network Fellow and Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at North South University in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dr. Matthew Nelson, PhD, Reader in Politics at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, United Kingdom, was the research supervisor. The team wishes to thank all the interviewees for their time and the RESOLVE Network for its support for this project.

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