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## *Bangabandhu's Vision of Secularism for Bangladesh*

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# **Bangabandhu's Vision of Secularism for Bangladesh**

Rounaq Jahan

## **Introduction**

Throughout his life Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was guided by the ideals of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism, ideals that were later enshrined in the Bangladesh Constitution as fundamental principles of the state. His political ideals and goals are quite explicitly expressed in the three books that have been published based on his diaries. These books, *The Unfinished memoirs*<sup>1</sup>, *Prison Diaries*<sup>2</sup> and *Amar Dekha Noya Chin*<sup>3</sup> narrate parts of his life story as well as articulate his personal beliefs and ideals. His speeches<sup>4</sup> have also been compiled and published.<sup>4</sup> They illuminate our understanding of the core principles of his life.

Bangabandhu's idealism was not theoretical or based simply on reading of books. He was a man of action whose ideals were inspired by the real life experiences of ordinary people. His politics was people's politics. He was cognisant of identity groups based on language, ethnicity and religion; but he did not try to create division and hatred between different identity groups. He perceived the nationalist movement not simply as a struggle to gain independence from the rule of an external colonial power but also as a struggle for the establishment of a democratic state and a just and equitable socio-economic order.

In an earlier article I have analysed the major elements of Bangabandhu's political philosophy<sup>5</sup>. Here I will focus only on one – his thoughts on secularism. I will draw on his life experiences, writings and speeches to explore his perspective on secularism.

The article is organized in four sections. Following the introduction, I discuss his early political initiation when he was only a school student. He

was inspired by *swadeshi* movement and its message of anti-colonialism. At the same time Bangabandhu was drawn to the Pakistan movement. However, all along he believed in Hindu-Muslim communal harmony. He argued that both Hindus and Muslims should be able to live as equal citizens in Pakistan and India. In the next section I discuss the evolution of his political life after the creation of Pakistan, how gradually he became disenchanted with the new state, became a strong champion of Bengali nationalism and a strong proponent of secular politics. The concluding section analyses how after the birth of Bangladesh some of the dimensions of secularism Bangabandhu propagated all through his life were reflected in the Bangladesh Constitution and his various policy measures.

### **Political Initiation: Self-rule, Pakistan Movement and Non-Communal Politics**

Bangabandhu became interested in politics at a young age when he was a high school student in Gopalganj. In his *Unfinished Memoirs* he writes about his exposure to the *swadeshi* movement in 1930s when he was a mere teenage boy. The movement's ideas of self-rule left a life-long imprint on Bangabandhu's political philosophy. He became an admirer of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, attended meetings of his party and started as he wrote in his *Memoirs* "mixing with people in the *Swadeshi* movement"<sup>6</sup>. He further notes:

"I began to harbour negative ideas about the British in my mind. The English, I felt had no right to stay in our country. We had to achieve independence"<sup>7</sup>!

His interest in Muslim League politics was, however, kindled by his meeting with Husyen Shaheed Suhrawardy who came on a visit to Gopalganj in 1938. Bangabandhu started writing letters to Suhrawardy and came into regular contact with him when he was enrolled in Islamia College, Kolkata in 1942. During 1940-47 he became active in the organizational work of the Muslim Student's League and the Muslim League. Within the Muslim League (ML) he was a supporter of the Suhrawardy-Abul Hashem group who were known as the progressives within the party.

He joined the Pakistan movement but as he writes in his *Unfinished Memoirs*, he was proud of both his Muslim identity and his Bengali identity. He writes:

“We Bengali Muslims have two sides, one is our belief that we are Muslims and the other that we are Bengalis”<sup>8</sup>

Bangabandhu believed that Pakistan should be established on the basis of the Lahore Resolution which envisaged two Muslim majority independent, sovereign states. While campaigning for Pakistan he invariably invoked the Lahore Resolution and talked about two Pakistans, one in the east comprising Bengal and Assam and another in the west comprising Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and the Frontier Province<sup>9</sup>.

Bangabandhu was a fervent supporter of the Pakistan movement; but he did not believe in theocracy nor was he ever moved by the argument that Pakistan needed to be created to save Islam. He believed that during colonial rule Muslims as a community had been deprived and excluded and they needed to be freed from all types of oppression. He joined the Pakistan movement in the hope that poor Muslim peasants would be liberated from the exploitation of the landlord and money-lending classes. He recognized that both Hindu and Muslim landlords have oppressed the poor Muslim peasants.

In his *Unfinished Memoirs* Bangabandhu lamented about the misguided politics of both Hindu and Muslim leaders who failed to speak up for the oppressed and exploited peasants and instead fuelled Hindu-Muslim communal divide. He writes:

“If these self-less freedom loving and dedicated Hindus had attempted to promote Hindu-Muslim unity while carrying on the movement to drive out the British and had stood up against the rapacious Hindu landlords and moneylenders who were oppressing the Muslims, perhaps the bitterness between the two communities would have been contained. Of the Hindu leaders only Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das and Netaji Subhas Bose had understood the importance of such gestures and had often cautioned Hindus against their prejudices. Rabindranath Tagore had also warned the Hindus about their stance through his writings.

But it was also true that Muslim leaders had been treating their Hindu tenants shabbily. However, they oppressed them as their landlords and not because of their religion. At that time one saw that whenever a Muslim leader spoke up for the rights of Muslims many Hindus, including educated ones, and even the brightest of them, would raise their voices in anger. Similarly even before they spoke for Pakistan Muslim leaders would preface their speeches by abusing Hindus<sup>10</sup>.

While actively campaigning for Pakistan Bangabandhu also worked for maintaining Hindu-Muslim communal harmony. He believed that both Hindus and Muslims should live in India and Pakistan with equal rights as citizens. He writes:

“Both communities could be given equal rights. Hindus could live as citizens in Pakistan just as Muslims could live freely in India. The Muslims would embrace the Hindus who lived with them as brothers just as the Hindus of India would with the Muslims who lived amidst them”.<sup>11</sup>

Bangabandhu witnessed the Hindu-Muslim communal riots in Kolkata on August 16, 1946. The carnage left a deep imprint in his mind. In his *Unfinished Memoirs* Bangabandhu writes extensively about the Kolkata riots when people from both communities engaged in violence. However, he also noted that some Hindus and some Muslims rose above their communal loyalties and saved each other during the riots. He himself saved both Muslims and Hindus from acts of communal violence. He describes his experience in the following way:

“I helped in rescuing stranded Muslims. In one or two places I came under attack while trying to help in this work. We also rescued Hindus whenever possible and had them sent to Hindu localities. It was obvious that people had lost their human sides in the violence and had regressed to their animal selves. On 16 August the Muslims had taken a beating. The next two days the Muslims beat up the Hindus mercilessly. The hospital figures were proof of the fatalities and injuries sustained by both communities on these days<sup>12</sup>.

In addition to being opposed to communal violence Bangabandhu was also opposed to misinterpretation of religion and its misuse for promoting partisan and political interests. In *Amar Dekha Noya Chin* he describes how before the referendum in Sylhet in 1946 he found many *Maulanas*,

who were paid money by the Congress party, campaigning against Pakistan. The *Maulanas* were quoting Quran and Hadith to justify their position. In seeking an explanation for the misuse of Quran and Hadith by these *Maulanas* Bangabandhu writes:

“Why do they [Maulanas] do this? They do it because it is a business for them”<sup>13</sup>.

After the establishment of Pakistan when he was leaving Kolkata Suhrawardy advised Bangabandhu to continue his work for Hindu-Muslim communal harmony so that Hindus would not migrate from East Bengal to West Bengal. Suhrawardy told him:

“When you go back to your country try to ensure communal harmony. If there is trouble in East Bengal it will be catastrophic. Try to ensure that Hindus don’t flee Pakistan. If they are forced to come here they will stir up troubles and that will result in an exodus of Muslims to East Bengal. If all the Muslims of Bengal, Bihar and Assam leave for East Bengal ... you will not be able to accommodate so many people”<sup>14</sup>.

It is quite clear from his writings that by the time he came to Pakistan in September 1947 Bangabandhu already developed strong feelings against Hindu-Muslim communal violence and misuse of religion as an instrument of politics. These positions were further consolidated after he came to Pakistan.

### **Political Maturity: Bengali Nationalism and Secular Politics**

Soon after coming to Pakistan Bangabandhu started becoming disenchanted with the direction of the country’s policies and politics. He found that a small privileged group of people were centralizing power in their hands to further their own vested interests instead of working to uplift the conditions of the masses. The ruling elites were also adopting policies against the political, economic and cultural interests of the Bengalees. Furthermore, they were using Islam as a political instrument to justify their repressive and unjust policies.

Bangabandhu realized the need to organize the progressive youths to resist the feudal and undemocratic elements who controlled the state machinery.

He already knew many of the student and youth leaders who like him belonged to the Suhrawardy-Hashem faction of the Muslim League and were also getting concerned about the political developments in Pakistan. Following Suhrawardy's advice initially he took up the cause of building Hindu-Muslim communal harmony as his main mission. He was enrolled as a student of law in Dhaka University and became associated with the Democratic Youth League which was composed of non-communal progressive young activists. But soon disagreement arose between him and other members. As Bangabandhu writes in his *Memoirs* he wanted the Youth League to act as a non-political cultural organization with the sole purpose of promoting communal harmony; but others wanted to expand the organization's activities to a variety of issues covering the political arena.

Bangabandhu, then, founded a new student organization to counter the activities of the already existing Muslim League's student front, All East Pakistan Muslim Student's League. He called his new organization "East Pakistan Muslim Student's League" which was formed in January 1948. Though some of the young progressive activists opposed keeping 'Muslim' in the name of the organization, Bangabandhu took a practical and gradual approach to the issue. He felt that time has not come for such change in name. He writes:

"If we hold on to our principles we could change the name at a later date .... It will take some time to change the mind-set of the people ... and turn them away from the mind-set that had made them participate in the movement for Pakistan".<sup>15</sup>

Within a month of founding the Student's League Bangabandhu got involved in the Bengali language movement. In February 1948, the Muslim League leaders in the Constituent Assembly declared their intention to make Urdu the sole state language of Pakistan. The students of Dhaka University immediately protested. Bangabandhu was arrested on 11 March, 1948 while demonstrating in front of the Secretariat building demanding recognition of Bengali as a state language, the first of many such arrests in the hands of Pakistan government.



During 1948-1949, in addition to the language movement, Bangabandhu was also involved in other movements related to struggles to improve the socio-economic conditions of the poor such as protests against the 'cordon' system which prohibited inter-district movement of food. In 1949, he became involved in the movement of the fourth class employees of Dhaka University for higher wages and was again imprisoned.

The Pakistan government's response to these demands was repression and attempt to malign the progressive political activists calling them either 'Indian agents', or "anti-Islamic" or "communists". Bengali language and culture was branded as being under Hindu influence and not being Islamic enough by some of the Muslim League leaders.

Bangabandhu gradually became convinced about the need to form an opposition political party. On June 23, 1949 East Pakistan Awami Muslim League (EPAML) was founded and Bangabandhu was elected the joint secretary of the party though he was still in prison. He notes in his *Memoirs* that he was personally in favour of giving a non-communal title to the party but again he was a political realist and accepted the decision to keep Muslim in the name of the party. He writes:

"It was my view that since Pakistan has been achieved there was no further reason to create a political organization tied to communal ideals. I was for a non-communal party based on sound manifesto. In the end I decided that the time had not yet come for such an organization. Perhaps those who had devised the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League had created it after thinking over all the issues involved"<sup>16</sup>.

Soon after the formation of the EPAML Bangabandhu was released from prison but within a few months he was again imprisoned and was kept in prison for over two years without a charge under the Public Security Act. He was finally released on February 28, 1952.

While he was in prison Hindu-Muslim communal riots broke out both in India and in East Bengal in 1950. In his *Memoirs* Bangabandhu expresses his strong disapproval of communal riots and his humane interpretation of religion. He writes:

“Many innocent Muslims in Calcutta and equally innocent Hindus in Dhaka and Barisal died in the riots ... . Many people were arrested and brought to Dhaka jail ... . I tried to tell the jailed ones that it wasn't right to get involved in rioting and the killing of people; it was in fact a sin to kill innocent people. A true Muslim couldn't kill anyone who was blameless; God and Prophet had forbidden such action. God has created Hindus as well as us. They deserved to be treated as human beings too. Just because some Hindus in India were involved in heinous actions did not mean we should be perpetrating violence here”<sup>17</sup>.

Bangabandhu stood not only against Hindu-Muslim communal violence but against all forms of communal violence, between different Muslim sects and between Bengalees and non-Bengalees. In his *Memoirs* he strongly condemns the anti-Kadiyani riots that took place in Lahore in 1953. He describes his faith in tolerance and non-violence in the following way:

“I know at least this much: that no one should be murdered because he holds views different from mine, that certainly was not what Islam taught and such an action was tantamount to a crime in the religion .... Let alone Kadiyanis Islam forbids punishing even non-believers ... Pakistan was supposed to be a democracy. Here people of all faith irrespective of race and religion were supposed to have equal rights”<sup>18</sup>.

In 1954 when communal riots broke out between Bengalee and non-Bengalee workers in Adamjee Jute Mills in Narayanganj Bangabandhu rushed to the area to calm the situation.

Bangabandhu looked upon communal violence as a divide and rule strategy of the ruling classes to perpetuate their oppression. In *Amar Dekha Noya Chin* he discusses at some length how every religion, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism has been misinterpreted and misused by oppressive rulers to create divisions within and between religious communities to instigate violence and war. He writes:

“It is the rule of the oppressive rulers to create divisions amongst the people so that their rule can be perpetrated. Whenever oppressed masses start a movement demanding their rights for food and clothing oppressive rulers begin instigating one community against the other. Unfortunately

the oppressed people then forget their own demands and instead get involved in communal violence against each other"<sup>19</sup>.

During 1953-54 Bangabandhu was busy building the organizational strength of the EPAML. In 1953 he was elected the general secretary of the party and remained in that position till 1966 when he was elected as the party's president. In 1954 in the East Bengal Provincial Assembly (PA) elections, the ruling Muslim League was routed by the opposition electoral alliance *Jukto Front* (JF) of which the EPAML was the major partner with 143 out of 223 seats won by the JF candidates. Bangabandhu was elected to the PA and sworn in as a minister. But the ministry was dismissed by the central government within ninety days and he was again imprisoned.

In 1955 Bangabandhu was elected to the National Assembly (NA) of Pakistan. The same year EPAML dropped the word "Muslim" from its title thus proclaiming its secular character. The party also came out in support of joint electorate comprising both Hindu and Muslim voters. The rejection of separate electorate for Hindus and Muslims was a major step forward in the gradual process of assertion of Bengali secular national identity.

By mid 1950s Bangabandhu was already emerging as the leading champion of the Bengali nationalist movement and secular politics. In various speeches delivered in the National Assembly he strongly articulated his non-communal positions and faith in equal rights of all citizens irrespective of religion.

In the National Assembly he opposed the proposal to name Pakistan an "Islamic Republic". He argued:

"If you declare that your country is an Islamic Republic ... at once minorities become second class citizens. At least I feel so and my conscience tells me it is against the fundamentals of Islam"<sup>20</sup>.

He cautioned:

"Have you ever imagined what would be their [Muslims in India] fate if you declare Pakistan "Islamic Republic of Pakistan"? ... the fanatic Hindus such as RSS and Mahasabhaists might agitate tomorrow for

declaring India a "Hindu Republic of India" for taking revenge on those unfortunate four crores of the Muslims of India who have sacrificed everything for the achievement of Pakistan"<sup>21</sup>.

Bangabandhu rejected the proposal for a separate electorate arguing that only in South Africa such a system existed; that all other countries including Muslim majority ones operated on the basis of joint electorate.

He also underscored the economic rationale for the creation of Pakistan. He said:

"Muslims wanted Pakistan not on the question of religion but on the question of economy. Because the Muslims in India were poor they wanted safeguard for the minorities and they wanted a homeland"<sup>22</sup>.

In 1958 the military dictator Field Marshall Ayub Khan took over power in Pakistan and Bangabandhu was again imprisoned. Political activities were banned. Following Suhrawardy's death in 1963 Bangabandhu reactivated the Awami League in 1964. In the same year when Hindu-Muslim communal riots broke out in India he started a civic campaign to resist communal riots in East Bengal and succeeded in preventing spread of violence.

In 1966 Bangabandhu presented the historic six-point demands which put forward a very radical notion of autonomy for East Bengal leaving only two subjects, defense and foreign affairs, in the hands of the central government. Six points captured the aspirations of the masses and was billed as the charter for the national liberation of the Bengalees. Following the launch of the six-point movement Bangabandhu was again imprisoned and later in 1968 while still in prison he was charged with treason by the Pakistan government in the Agartala conspiracy case.

The rising tide of Bengali nationalism which asserted language rather than religion as the basis of Bengali nationhood shook the very foundations of the idea of Pakistan which was based on the two-nation theory that Hindus and Muslim constitute two separate nations. The Pakistan government's response to this rising tide was the same as before; it branded the Bengali nationalists as "Hindu-leaning" or "Indian agents" or "anti-Islamic".

Ayub Khan's governor in East Bengal Monem Khan revived the old Muslim League charge that Bengali is a non-Muslim language. Tagore songs were banned from radio Pakistan and the import of books and films from West Bengal was prohibited. The attack on Bengali language and culture, however, led to a resurgence of Bengali nationalism. Tagore's birthday was celebrated with much more publicity by private organizations.

Bangabandhu was finally released from prison in 1969 when Dhaka University student's movement transformed itself into a mass movement. The students put forward eleven-point demands which included the Awami League's six-points but went beyond the issue of autonomy and provided a vision for a socialist economy. Bangabandhu pledged support for the eleven points.

Ayub Khan finally stepped down and a new military ruler Yahya Khan took over power. Yahya announced general election dates in 1970, the first to be held in Pakistan's 23 year history. Yahya also agreed to joint electorate and representation on the basis of population, two key demands of the Bengali nationalists.

Bangabandhu decided to contest the election and began to use Bengali nationalist symbols and slogans to unite the whole Bengali nation behind his demands. At a discussion meeting held on 5 December 1969 to observe the death anniversary of Suhrawardy Bangabandhu declared that henceforth East Pakistan would be called Bangladesh. He added that "there was a time when evil efforts were made to wipe out the word 'Bangla' from our land and map. The existence of the word 'Bangla' was found nowhere except in the Bay of Bengal. I on behalf of the people proclaim today that the eastern province of Pakistan will be called Bangladesh instead of East Pakistan"<sup>23</sup>.

During the 1970 election campaign the AL used posters and slogans highlighting Bengali nationalist identity. "Joy Bangla" became a favourite slogan. A poster stating "Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists of

Bengal, we are all Bengalees” was widely used to project the secular values of the AL.

In one of his campaign speeches on October 30, 1970 Bangabandhu reiterated his commitment to secularism. He said:

“Irrespective of race and religion, everybody is equal in front of All Mighty Allah. The people of the minority community are entitled to enjoy equal rights and opportunities like any other citizen. I call upon the people of the majority community to ensure the security and rights of the minority community”<sup>24</sup>.

The results of the 1970 general elections demonstrated the unity of the Bengali nation. The Awami League won 167 out of the 169 seats allocated to East Pakistan in the National Assembly and 288 out of 300 seats in the Provincial Assembly elections.

The Pakistani rulers, however, were not prepared to abide by the election results. On March 1, 1971 Yahya Khan postponed the meeting of the National Assembly scheduled for March 3, 1971. The immediate response of the Bengalees was to demand independence. On March 7, 1971 Bangabandhu delivered his historic speech where he proclaimed, “*Ebarer Sangram amader muktir Sangram, ebarer Sangram Sadhinatar Sangram*”<sup>25</sup>. (The struggle this time is for our liberation, the struggle this time is for independence).

It is noteworthy that while he was calling upon all Bengalees to prepare for independence struggle he cautioned them against engaging in acts of communal violence. He said:

“Be very careful, keep in mind that the enemy has infiltrated our ranks to engage in the work of provocateurs. Whether Bengalee or non-Bengalee, Hindu or Muslim, all are our brothers and it is our responsibility to ensure their safety”<sup>26</sup>.

On March 25, 1971, the Pakistani military launched a genocidal attack on the unarmed Bengalees and on March 26, 1971 the independence of Bangladesh was declared in the name of Bangabandhu. After a nine month long armed struggle Bangladesh was finally liberated when on December

16, 1971, the Pakistani military surrendered to the allied forces of India and Bangladesh. The birth of Bangladesh was unprecedented as it was the first instance of a linguistic-nationalist movement succeeding in creating a new state in the post-colonial era.

### **Bangabandhu's Vision in Bangladesh Constitution**

The proclamation of independence on April 10, 1971 declared Bangladesh to be a People's Republic thus underscoring the secular character of the new state. Secularism in Bangladesh was not meant to be a strict separation of state and religion as practiced in France (*Laicite*). Secularism in Bangladesh was defined as the state keeping a neutral position vis-à-vis all religions; no one religion to be placed in a privileged position. All religious groups are to have equal rights to practice their respective religions freely. And all citizens, irrespective of their religion, are to enjoy equal civil, political and economic rights.

Bangabandhu was a person of strong faith and as he wrote in *Amar Dekha Noya Chin* he was proud of being a Muslim. But he emphasised religion's spiritual aspect and underscored the egalitarian, tolerant and peaceful messages of Islam. He was against misuse of religion for furthering political and economic interests of individuals and groups. That was the rationale for prohibition of religion-based organizations by the 1972 Bangladesh Constitution.

Bangabandhu elaborated his vision of secularism when he spoke in the parliament on November 4, 1972 when the Bangladesh Constitution was approved. He said:

“Secularism does not mean atheism ... We will not stop practice of religion ... Muslims will practice their religion ... Hindus will practice their religion ... Buddhists will practice their religion ... Christians will practice their religion ... We will only object to political use of religion. For the last 25 years we have seen oppression, exploitation, murder, ... in the name of religion. Religion is a sacred thing. We will not allow use of sacred religion as a political instrument”<sup>27</sup>.

Bangladesh Constitution which became effective from December 16, 1972 adopted secularism as one of the four fundamental principles of the state,

the other three being nationalism, democracy and socialism (Article 8). The constitution states that the principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of communalism in all its forms, the granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion, the abuse of religion for political purposes, and any discrimination against or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion (Article 27). The constitution provides for equality of all citizens before law (Article 27) and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion (Article 28). It also prohibits discrimination in public employment on grounds of religion (Article 29). The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Article 41 states that every citizen has the right to profess, practice and propagate any religion, that every religious community has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions and no person attending educational institutions shall be required to receive religious education or take part or attend any religious ceremony or worship which is not his or hers.

While freedom of association is permitted, the constitution prohibits formation of associations for purposes of destroying religious, social and communal harmony or creating discrimination among citizens on the ground of religion, race, caste, sex,<sup>†</sup> place of birth or language (Article 38). Professor Anisuzzaman, who was closely associated with the drafting of the constitution, notes in his *Memoirs, Bipula Prithibi* that Article 38 was specifically included in the constitution by Dr. Kamal Hossain at the request of Bangabandhu who wanted to put an end to political use of religion<sup>28</sup>.

The adoption of secularism as a fundamental principle as well as its inclusion in various articles of the constitution made Bangladesh a pioneer amongst the South Asian states. Though India always claimed that it was following secular policies, secularism was formally adopted as a part of the Indian constitution only in 1976 through the 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment of the constitution, four years after the adoption of secularism by the Bangladesh Constitution in 1972.

As noted earlier the adoption of secularism in the constitution did not mean that the country would follow the French model of *Laicite* and not provide



state funding to any religious institution. Following the practice of India, in Bangladesh too secularism was interpreted as the state maintaining equidistance from all religions. Indeed Bangladesh government under Bangabandhu's leadership established Islamic Foundation and re-organized Madrassa Education Board. In *Amar Dekha Noya Chin* we note that Bangabandhu was supportive of the communist government's policies of state funding for religious institutions. He observed the progressive outlook of state-funded religious associations in China who were working towards removing misinterpretation of religious texts and practices.

Unfortunately, Bangabandhu did not live long enough to nurture the practice of secularism in Bangladesh. After his assassination on August 15, 1975, the two successive military rulers Ziaur Rahman and Hossain Muhammad Ershad deviated from the secular path, revived communal politics and privileged Islam, practices against which Bangabandhu fought all his life. Ziaur Rahman removed secularism as a guiding principle from the constitution and Ershad made Islam a state religion.

The practices of communal politics continued even after the overthrow of military rule and restoration of electoral democracy in 1991. However, in 2005, the High Court declared the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the constitution, (which deleted secularism) as illegal. In 2010, the Supreme Court upheld the High Court's decision. This paved the way for restoration of secularism in the Bangladesh Constitution. Finally in 2011 the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed in the parliament which restored secularism in the constitution but Islam still remained as the state religion thus leaving our position on secularism equivocal.

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