

Accentuating the Politics of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to comprehend the characteristics of the politics of Bangladesh that have been getting shape since the inception of secular parliamentary democratic system in the country in 1972. The paper argues that the trajectory of the politics has been a bumpy road and this, eventually led the polarisation of the politics. The polarisation in Bangladeshi politics emerged as a basic feature since the Liberation War. And initially the polarisation happened in the form of pro- and anti-India, pro- and anti-China and pro- and anti-Soviet

Union fronts. However, the paper does not concern with this polarisation. The polarisation which has been caused by domestic politics is the focus of the paper. The role of Islam in the Bangladeshi political system, the spirit of the Liberation War and the system of governance have become the major factors on which Bangladeshi politics polarised.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Caretaker Government, Liberation War, Islamist, Secular, Awami League, Polarisation, Islam, secularism.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1972 the constitution of Bangladesh was promulgated in the midst of various socio-economic and political challenges facing the war-torn country. In these circumstances, Bangladesh began its journey from 1972 as a secular state but, could not sustain this position for long. The first Awami League (AL)-led secular government of the state could not fulfil its promises to which it had committed during the Liberation War. The heightened expectations of the people due to the promises remained unfulfilled. The disappointing performance of the AL-led government undermined newly set up state institutions. Mujibism failed before gaining the trust of the Bengali people.¹ The credibility of Mujibism was being questioned among people due to the inability of the government to solve people's social and economic difficulties. When Mujibur Rahman took some steps to neutralise the crisis of legitimacy to which he was facing, the four pillars of the state namely secularism, socialism, democracy and Bengali nationalism, became less attractive. As the state institutions were newly set up, it needed time to be consolidated. But within three to four years, the constitution was amended to centralise state power. An emergency power, which was given to the president, made it possible for the state to head towards authoritarianism. The authoritarian tendency of the Mujib government ended after his assassination (15 August 1975), which eventually led to a military regime.

The emergence of the military-junta regime, which was backed by rightist and radical leftist groups, wrecked the democratic institutions. Under the military-junta regime, all power of executive, legislative and judiciary was possessed by one

person, which eventually led to the manipulation of state institutions and the bureaucracy. Bangladesh's Election Commission could never work independently (Hakim, 2002: 104). It was always used by governments for electoral manipulation. This is why after every national election the defeated party alleges irregularities in election and blames the Election Commission for being partisan. Although non-partisan caretaker governments were institutionalised with constitutional status for conducting free and fair elections, it could not win credibility among political elites. In fact, the caretaker government was manipulated during the BNP-led four party-alliance government to a great extent. Finally, its abolition by the current AL government made opposition parties to come out on the streets to protest and demand a reinstatement of the care-taker government. Free and fair elections are essential requirement for a democracy and the growth of a harmonised political culture.

The military-junta regime used Islam as a source of legitimacy and as political tool to legitimise itself in the eyes of the people. The crisis of secularism, which happened due to not addressing the socio-economic challenges of the people by the first government of the AL, gave Islamists an opportunity to emerge as political players. By declaring Islam as the state religion General Ershad claimed that religion had potential to solve the socio-economic problems of Bangladesh (Hakim, 1998). And Islamist political parties were legitimised during the movement for the restoration of democracy. After the legitimisation of Islamist political parties and their emergence as a considerable political force, the main

political parties have focused on how to obtain support from these very outfits to capture state power. Often, the principal parties made alliances with Islamist political parties to capture power. During the anti-Ershad movement and in the 1990s both the BNP and the AL maintained formal and informal relations with the Jamaat-e-Islami (Riaz, 2003). In this sense, both the principal political parties became instrumental in accommodating Islamist political parties in the country's politics due to power politics and antagonism with each other. Both political parties took the support of Islamist political parties during street politics. The AL had colluded in the early 1990s with the Jamaat to overthrow the first BNP-led government after the restoration of democracy (Islam, 2001) while the BNP led-four-party alliance government provided a big space for Islamist political parties in the political system and governance of Bangladesh.

II. POLITICAL POLARISATION UNDER MILITARY-JUNTA REGIME

Political polarisation under military-junta regime (1975-1990) began after the promulgation of the PPR Act which allowed political actors to be active in indoor politics (Hossain, 2000). Dankwart Rustow (1963) says that "the ultimate success of a military-junta regime depends on its skill in allowing or promoting the rise of effective civilian leadership" (p.19). In this respect Ziaur Rahman permitted political party to perform. Thus, various political parties revived and reorganised, along with they also crossed and faced various factionalism. Meanwhile, Zia planned to form his party so that the requirement of political legitimacy for him could be ensured (Chowdhury, 1995). He introduced a political platform without direct involvement in it. In February 1978, Jatiyotabadi Ganatantrik Dal (JAGODAL) was organised with the approval of President Zia².

In the course of the presidential election of 1978, political parties became polarised. Jatiyotabadi Front (JF) or National Front emerged a political bloc with joining of Ziaur Rahman in an electoral alliance of six political parties- the JAGODAL, People's Party, Bangladesh Muslim League, Bangladesh Labour Party, and Bangladesh Scheduled Caste Federation, NAP (B) included. The JF supported Ziaur Rahman's 19-point program, in which "the four fundamental principles of the Constitution, i.e. complete faith in and reliance on the Almighty Allah, Democracy, Nationalism, and Socialism meaning economic and social justice" were comprised, and presidential form of government for the country.

In later, the JAGODAL, and factions of the NAP (B), the United People Party, and Muslim League merged with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The BNP was formed in September 1978 by General Ziaur Rahman under his chairmanship. Its ideology was

"Bangladeshi Nationalism." Indeed, the BNP was the mixture of several political parties and factions particularly leftist and rightist factions, which kept a common desire to be patronised by Zia's regime, and to hold positions in the government (Jahan, 1980: 213). The electoral symbol of the BNP interestingly came from one of the mixture parties. The sheaf of paddy, which became the symbol of the BNP, was the symbol of NAP (B) which had propagated "Islamic Socialism" under Maulana Bhasani's leadership.

Another alliance emerged during military-junta regime was Ganotantrik Oiky Jote (GOJ) or United Democratic Alliance. It comprised several political parties namely Awami League, National Awami Party (M), and Janata Party, Kirishak Sramik Party, Gana Azadi League, and Bangladesh People's League. The manifestoes of the GOJ encompassed to return parliamentary democracy, safeguarding the values of the Liberation War, maintaining foreign relations based on non-alignment etc.

Finally, during the anti-Ershad movement³, both alliances were reshaped into 7-party alliance and 15-party alliance. The BNP formed a 7-party alliance with the collaboration with United People's Party, Bangladesh Jatiya League, Ganatantrik Party, NAP (Nurul Rahman), Krishak Sramik Party and Bangladesh Biplobi Communist League. The 7-Party alliance was an amalgamation of both rightist and left political parties (Hasanuzzaman, 1998: 108). Although the main Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami did not join with any alliance, it maintained "an informal understanding with BNP and its 7-party alliance." (Kabir, 2002:164). The AL formed 15-party alliance in which mostly party came from Gonotantrik Oiky Jote and its factions. The 15-Party alliance was combination of Awami League, BAKSAL, JSD, Gana Azadi League, Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal, Worker Party, NAP (Harun), NAP (Muzaffar), CPB, Sammobadi Dal, Jatiya Ekota Party, Sharmic Krishak Samajbadi Dal, BSD (Mahbubul Haq), Awami League (Siddique) and Mazdur Party. The 15-Party alliance reduced to an 8-Party alliance when Awami League decided to participate in third Jatiya Sangsad election of 1986. Five pro-Chinese left parties of the 15-party alliance formed a separate 5-Party alliance because they had opposed the pro-election decision of Awami League (Riaz, 2016).

The polarisation was not new at that time in Bangladesh but the interesting thing was that the major element and issue of polarisation were shifting from the external cause to domestic causes. Earlier, political parties were divided and factionalised on the line of pro-Moscow, pro-China and pro-India but later the polarisation was happening on internal issues like religious element, type of nationalism, the spirit of Liberation War, the form of governance etc.

The political forces of Bangladesh were being reconfigured during the military-junta regime. Islamist political parties became emerging political players and they established "their credentials" during the period. "Their credentials" could be seen in their confidence to form rightist electoral alliance (Rashiduzzaman, 1997).

Meanwhile, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad was endeavouring to "civilianise" his administration and to consolidate his power (Lewis, 2012: 88). Motivated by the success of the BNP which facilitated Ziaur Rahman to advance legitimacy to his rule, he established Jatiya Party (JP) in 1986 in direction to civilianise his regime. The ideological orientation of the Jatiya Party was not very different from the BNP's ideology. "Islamic ideology, Bangladeshi nationalism, sovereignty, and social progress and economic emancipation are the party's ideology" (Jahan, 2014). It followed the BNP's Islamisation process and made "Islam" as a state religion of the Republic of Bangladesh⁴. The quest of the state-sponsored party like the BNP and Jatiya Party to endorse the Islamisation process had been huge implication in term of the political process and development of the country. Islam became institutionalised as a state ideology in the constitution and it subsequently became hard for political actors to take a stand against the legitimacy of Islam in the political process. Islamic stand of Ershad further accelerated the polarisation based on secular-Islamist discourse.

III. RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

During the anti-Ershad movement, the political actors were divided on the governing system of the country. The AL led centrist-leftist 15-Party alliance and the BNP led 7-Party alliance were also polarised on the constitutional question of government system along with old rivalries between their main political parties. The 15-Party alliance demanded parliamentary democracy as introduced by constitution 1972 while the 7-Party alliance sought presidential multi-party democracy (Hasanuzzaman, 1998: 108). After the fall of Ershad's military regime, democracy was restored in Bangladesh. In 1991 general election was held and the BNP led government was formed with the hope that political stability would be ensured because of the election was conducted under a supervision of a natural body, and marked by national and international observers as a free and fair election. But, immediately, political parties themselves united against the BNP led government for the replacement of the presidential system with the parliamentary system. Leading opposition party AL, BNP's ally the Jamaat-e-Islami and the parties belonging left 5-Party alliance pressurised the government for the demand (Hasanuzzaman 1998: 145). As there were many supporters of the demand within the BNP so this

issue could not become much chaos in the country. Eventually, the parliamentary form of governance was reinstated by Twelfth Amendment Act, 1991.

IV. SECULAR-ISLAMISTS POLARISATION

In 1988, the country's second military ruler Hussain Muhammad Ershad declared Islam as the state religion through the Eighth Constitutional Amendment Act. It was the culmination of Islamisation process of the Bangladeshi polity, which had been begun by Zia since mid-1970s. Defending his move he explained Islam as a potential religion to solve the socio-economic problems of Bangladesh (Hakim, 1998). Interestingly, it was unclear whether the Bengali Muslims wanted Islam to be bestowed as the status of the state religion of Bangladesh. There was no popular demand came from the masses for the Act (Islam, 2015). Definitely, it was the political decision of political elites of the autocratic regime for winning the heart of Muslim majority in Bangladesh to sustain their grip on state power.

Numerous secular, feminist and human right NGOs and individuals extremely condemned the move of Ershad. They started a campaign against the amendment and demanded to reinstate the secular principle and the spirit of the Liberation War. "Naripakhya" and "Oikyobandho Nari Samaj" protested the Act. According to their arguments, the "sovereignty of the country" and "the spirit of the Liberation War" were jeopardised due to the amendment (Hashmi, 2011: 112). Secular-socialists minded people like freedom fighters, professors and retired Colonel protested the amendment and supported anti-Ershad movement under the banner of the "Muktijuddho Chetona Bikash Kendro."

Meanwhile, the late 1980s and 1990s Islamist political parties and groups had got the political recognition as a decisive political force especially after the restoration of democracy in the country. Islam became a very dynamic issue in the political discourse of Bangladesh. Islam does not remain only a religion but it became a tool to serve various purposes of political leaders, extremists, Orthodox ulemas and misogynists. Since the 1990s, in the name of Islam, religious minorities like Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, and women, writers, intellectual, secular individuals, and NGOs were frequently assaulted by using several traditional Islamic institutions such as Fatwa and Salish. Along with this, the tactic of intimidation and propagating the slogan "insult of Prophet Muhammad" often has been being used by Islamist groups to oppress the religious minority and secular-minded people. During the period, religious tools such as Fatwa, Blasphemy law have been severely politicised by the political actors to mobilise people for expanding their political base.

The first major target of radical Islamist forces has been Taslima Nasreen when her novel "Lajja" was published in 1993. An Islamic group "Shahab Sainik Parishad" (SSP) from Sylhet issued a Fatwa sentencing her to death (Riaz, 2008). It was alleged that her writing had insulted the religious sentiment of the Muslim Community. Due to her writings and comments on Islam, patriarchy, society and tradition, Taslima Nasreen always is being targeted by extremist Islamist forces since the publication of the novel. When the Supreme Court gave a verdict against the legality of Fatwa in 2001, the Muslim community of the country further polarised. Muslim clerics became divided on the line of pro-Fatwa and anti-Fatwa. Pro-fatwa Islamist launched violent protest against the verdict and demanded to remove the judges who declared Fatwa illegal. The judges were declared by Islamist as apostates. In the violent confrontation between police and Islamist several people died. The dead were stated by "Islamic constitution Movement" as "martyrs of Jihad" and it asserted that "no power on earth can stop the Jihad for Islamic rule in this country"(Riaz, 2005).

After the Taslima episode, the demand for "Blasphemy law" became very common demand of Islamist groups. Eventually, in 1994 a prominent Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami tried to introduce Blasphemy law in the parliament of Bangladesh. Since then Islamic extremist forces have been demanding to enact the Blasphemy law. In December 2008, during electoral campaigns, BNP alliance partner Jamaat-i-Islami promised to implement the law to check anti-Islamic exposures or criticism of Islam in books, newspapers or electronic media, if the BNP-led four-party alliance would form the government. In 2013 About 100000 people gathered after a long march at Dhaka and called for a new blasphemy law with the provision of the death penalty.

Secular NGOs has been always a soft target of the Islamist forces. In 1994, Shaikhul Hadis Maulana Azizul Haq alleged the NGOs were involved in damaging Islam and freedom of the country. Islamist groups conceived the NGOs and their activities as the part of Jews and Christian's conspiracy to convert Bengali Muslim into Christianity and atheism (Riaz, 2008). On June 30, 1994, they called a nationwide strike and demanded the banning of "anti-Islamic" newspapers and the NGOs activities. Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition (BWHC) clinic in Zakiganj, Sylhet was burned by a mob and its adjacent NGO, Friends in Village Development of Bangladesh (FIVDB) was wrecked (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

The Islamist forces got a morale boost when the four-party coalition government was formed with the collaboration of the Islamist political party in 2001. The coalition government appropriated the religious

extremist groups. They have been put in in the state apparatus, especially in those departments which were controlled by the Jamaat leaders. The extremists conceived the communal government as protectors and enjoyed protection from the authorities with impunity. Shahriar Kabir articulates that: "The coalition government has been quite successful in setting examples of torturing and killing members of religious minorities and ethnic communities, leaders, activists and sympathizers of opposition political parties, intellectuals and professionals subscribing to secular democracy" (Kabir, 2013). The accommodation of Islamic fundamentalist parties in the government of Bangladesh accelerated communal polarisation in the country. The Islamist became successful to install their people in the bureaucracy of Bangladesh. Therefore, Islamist began to use the government system for their objectives.

On the 9th of March 2013, a Madrasa based radical association "Hefazat-e-Islam", patronised by both the Jamaat and the BNP, put forward a 13 point demand. The 13 point demand include the demand for a Sharia state, the banning of Bangladesh's pro-women development policy, a ban on mixing of women and men in public and an anti-blasphemy law and exemplary punishment of "atheist bloggers" who "insult Islam", ban on erecting sculptures in public places, declaring Ahmadiyas as "no-Muslims." Subsequently an Islamists group emerged called "Ansarullah Bengal Team" (ABT). The ABT also called "Ansar Bangla" is an Islamic extremist organization in Bangladesh, involved brutal attacks and murders of atheist bloggers, secular professors, doctors, religious minorities, foreign nationals and intellectuals from 2013 to 2016. The organisation follows al-Qaeda's ideology. Notably, many of its members started their careers in the "Islami Chhatra Shibir"(ICS), student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami.

At present, the constitution of Bangladesh truly is reflective of the division of Bangladeshi society on the line of secularist vs. Islamists. Currently, the constitution is both Islamic and secular. The secularism has been restored in the constitution without removing Islam as the State religion. As well as the Islamic phrase 'Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim' was retained in the constitution and the provision allowing religion-based politics was maintained. These changes have been carried through Fifteen Amendment Act 2011 by the secular government of the AL after the Supreme Court of Bangladesh gave "verdict in favour of reviving the "secular-socialist constitution" by annulling the Fifth Amendment of the constitution (Hashmi, 2011: 36) The polarisation of the constitution showed that the Islamist forces are gaining strengthen day-by-day. The AL, which is fascinated with secularism, did not dare to remove the status of Islam as a state religion

due to fear of losing its support base in the society where 90 percent population are Muslim.

V. THE ISSUE OF NON-PARTISAN CARETAKER GOVERNMENT

Since the 1990s the caretaker government has been always a burning issue after and before every national election. The early 1990s the opposition parties began to demand a fresh election under a caretaker government. The AL, the JP and the Jamaat-e-Islami made a collaboration called "troika" against the BNP-led government despite ideological difference among the parties (Islam, 2001). The early 1990s the nature of the political polarisation was very dynamic and issue-based rather than ideology. Keeping ideological conformity to the BNP the Islamist political party like the Jamaat-e-Islami became close to secular AL to oppose the BNP. The "troika" demanded the resignation of the government, dissolution of Parliament and fresh elections under a neutral caretaker government. The oppositions threatened that their members of parliament would resign en masse if the demand was not fulfilled by December 27, 1994. Finally, in the pressure of opposition parties, various business communities, professionals, government employs and NGOs, the government had to agree to make the provision to institutionalise the constitutional status of caretaker government in the constitution through the Thirteenth constitutional amendment act, 1996.

After the institutionalisation of the caretaker government, the chaotic political situation could not be stopped. Its constitutional status, structure, functions, and manipulations by a ruling party made it a fragile and trustless institution among political actors. During the BNP led government in 2004, the retirement age of Supreme Court judges was increased from 65 to 67 by the fourteenth amendment of the constitution. The move of the ruling party was considered as an attempt to install its people in the caretaker government so that incoming election can be manipulated in the favour of the party. The four-party alliance pushed for the appointment of K.M. Hasan as Chief Advisory of the caretaker government. Oppositions alleged that Hasan belonged to the ruling BNP in the past. Finally, Hasan declined to head the interim government. However, President Iajuddin Ahmed appointed himself as the Chief Advisor ignoring the constitutional directive. The attempt to manipulate the system of the caretaker government made it problematic. Eventually, the system was abolished through Fifteen Amendment in 2011 by the AL government which had made collaboration with rightist political party in the 1990s for institutionalisation of the no-partisan caretaker government. This move of the government allowed oppositions to mobilise against the government. In April 2012, the BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia

announced the 18-party alliance to strengthen the party's anti-government movement demanding the restoration of the caretaker government system.

VI. POLITICS OF ALLIANCE AND POLITICAL POLARISATION

In 1996 general election the AL emerged as the largest single party by winning 146 seats and 37.44% of the vote while the BNP and the JP managed respectively 116 and 32 seats. As happened earlier in the electoral history of Bangladesh after every national election, defeated party the BNP did not accept its defeat in the election and charged that the election was rigged. The political culture of intolerance and antagonism in the country has been provoking opposition party to rebuff the victory of contender party after every national election of the country. "Trust deficit" among political actors is the major cause of political chaos in the country. The trust deficit has a historical legacy which can be seen the manipulation of the constitutions and state institutions during the military-junta regime. Sheikh Mujib, Ziaur Rahman and Ershad treated the election commission, as one of the government departments (Hakim 2002: 104). In fact, the election commission of Bangladesh miserably failed to conduct free and fair election from 1973 because of the fragility of its power under the mentioned rulers. So it can be seen after every national election, the defeated political party always make an allegation against election commission to be partisan in favour of winning party. Trust deficit has been further aggravated by political violence and patronise politics which led polarisation of the Bangladeshi society.

The BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia claimed that "due to the AL's repression of the BNP leaders and party workers, she was left no choice but to return to streets." (Kochanek, 1998). She started to oppose the AL's pro-Indian policies and its inability to recover the economy, solve the power crisis and water scarcity (Islam, 2002). In BNP protests against the government was further strengthened by joining the Jamaat and a faction of the JP. Finally, this closeness among opposition parties turned into a 4-Party alliance which was a combination of Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party (Manju), and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ). The alliance was based not only due to the similar enemy to the AL but also due to ideological sameness. The BNP and the JP believe in religious nationalism while The Jamaat and IOJ seek to convert Bangladesh polity into Islamic State. This alliance contested the parliamentary election of 2001 in which it won the election and formed the government.

The Islamic fundamentalist parties- the Jamaat and the IOJ were included in the newly formed government which became a landmark in the polity of the country in term of polarisation of Bangladeshi

society. The coalition government provided a big space for religious extremism, political violence, minority's persecution, human right violation and harassment of secularists (Kabir, 2013). Antagonism and revenge became high, and murder, intimidation, suppression and harassment of political opponent worsened political, and law and order situation. Deteriorating law and order situation has been already polarising populaces for the quest for security of life and property. Political actors and general masses become polarised on the communal line when government-sponsored tyranny took formal shape in governance. The government, for the sake of curbing the deteriorating law and order situation, had called on the army and formed a joint force which launched "Operation Clean Heart" to restore order⁵. But Opposition the AL and Bangladesh communist party (CPB) accused that the govt.'s main objective was the subjugation of opposition groups rather than dropping crime.

Meanwhile, the BNP tried to use its political power to ensure its success in coming next Parliamentary election. It brought various constitutional changes through the fourteenth amendment to the constitution. The amendment included an increase of the retirement age of Supreme Court Judges, reservation of 45 seats for women on a proportional representation basis. Along with, this it made provision to display pictures of the President and the Prime Minister in all government, semi-government and independent offices and diplomatic missions overseas.

The Awami League and 10 other political parties unanimously rejected the Amendment at a meeting held at the Awami League's Dhanmondi office on 16 May 2004. The AL tried to form a new alliance keeping in mind the scheduled election in 2006. Ultimately, the AL-led 14-party alliance was launched. The alliance was combinations of the Awami League (AL), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the JP, the Bikalpa Dhara (BD) and other small parties. The alliance further strengthened in late 2006 through street agitations against BNP led 4-party alliance which was manipulating caretaker government and electoral body through the various suspected appointment.

The AL-led 14 party alliance, which was called 'grand alliance,' won the 2008 parliamentary election with more than two-thirds majority. In the election, the AL secured 48.6 percent while the BNP gain 32.45 percent. The landslide victory of the alliance especially the AL gave a psychological boost to the secularists and pro-liberation people and political actors, who have been facing 4-party alliance-led government-sponsored political violence, religious extremism and extra-judiciary killing. Newly formed AL-led secular government took various steps to install secular oriented provision and policies in

Bangladeshi polity by implementing the Fifteenth Amendment.

The move further sharply polarised the Bangladeshi society and polity. In April 2012, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia announced the 18-party alliance to strengthen the party's anti-government movement demanding the restoration of the caretaker government system which had been abolished by the Amendment in 2011. Later, the alliance expanded to 20 parties after factions of the Jatiya Party and Samyabadi Dal joined in. The 20-party alliance are the combinations of the BNP, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Oikya Jote, Bangladesh Jatiya Party, Khelafat Mojlish (Ishak), Liberal Democratic Party, Jatiya Ganatantrik Party, Bangladesh Kalyan Party, National People's Party, Bangladesh National Awami Party, Jamiyote Olamaye Islami Bangladesh, Bangladesh Muslim League, National Democratic Party, Bangladesh Labour Party, Bangladesh Islamic Party, Democratic League (Oli Ahad), National Awami Party-Bhasani (NAP), People's League, Jatiya Party (Zafar) and Sammobadi Dal.

Both political alliances have own tools and issues to encounter their opposition. The major demand of 20-party alliance has been to reinstate the no-partisan caretaker government for free and fair elections, and for that hartal and demonstrations, violence became part and parcel of its strategy. AL-led alliance government has been using corruption and war crime trials as coercive tools to oppress oppositions. The repressive tendencies of the current government are making weak state's institutions which have been already fragile due to lack of proper democratic process and consensus among political actors. Therefore, the trust of people on the state institutions is decreasing due to the manipulation of administration and state apparatuses by the government. These complications provide space to fundamentalists to be accessible in Bangladeshi polity.

VII. PRO-LIBERATION VS ANTI-LIBERATION

The people of Bangladesh has been experiencing keen polarisation of Bangladeshi polity between pro and anti-Liberation. The pro-liberation represents secular and liberal parties and groups and individuals while anti-Liberation represents Islamist political parties and 'Islam loving' groups and individuals. The political elites of the country had made the ground for the polarisation through the legal arrangements and various constitutional amendments since the mid-1970s. The military-junta regime had provided big space to anti-liberation forces to return in mainstream politics for the sake of its legitimacy and for containing the AL (Hashmi, 2011: 110). In the late 1980s, a list of the "killers and collaborators of 1971" was revealed by a Bengali book "Since then the

polity has been sharply polarised between pro and anti-liberation forces" (Hashmi, 2011:12).

As the Jamaat-e-Islami, which had opposed the Liberation War, became a considerable political entity in the 1990s, it attempted to rehabilitate its leaderships and make ground for its ideology and agendas in the society. The rise of the Jamaat frightened secular-liberal and pro-liberation groups and individuals. Therefore, on 19 January 1992 the supporters of the Liberation War, secular individuals and activist comprising professors, artists, retired supreme court judges, journalists formed "Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee" (the killer-Collaborator Elimination Committee) to bring the war criminals of the 1971 liberation war to justice and to combat against communal politics in the country (Pattanaik, 2013). In March 1992 the Nirmul committee organised a "public trial" of Jamaat leaders and war criminal Ghulam Azam who had been elected as the Ameer of the party in December 1991. The AL gave it supports to the Nirmul Committee to take political benefit. Local Nirmul members were advised to engage in a systematic anti-Jamaat campaign before the election (Shehabuddin, 2011:96). During the 1996 parliamentary election, the pro-liberation groups frequently campaign against the Jamaat in its stronghold areas. In 1996, pro-liberation forces celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Liberation War. Secularist forces constantly appealed the "spirit of ideals of 1971"- secularism, socialism, democracy and Bengali nationalism.

Meanwhile, anti-liberation forces expended its base after the formation of Four-party alliance government in 2001 with the support of anti-liberation forces especially the Jamaat-e-Islami. War criminals and Jamaat leaders Motiur Rahman Nizami and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed were installed in the government as, respectively, Minister of agriculture and social welfare. After the intrusion of anti-liberation forces and the Islamist party in the government of Bangladesh, their Islamic programs and agendas were accelerated and supported by government apparatus. Notorious war criminals and the then Member of Parliament Delwar Hossain Sayedee, proclaimed on 4 January 2002, that "courts won't be allowed to control fatwas, instead fatwas would control the courts" (Riaz, 2005). He also issued fatwa announcing Shahriar Kabir a Murtad (a person eligible to kill). Shahriar Kabir is executive president of Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee and war crimes researcher. He was arrested on the charges of sedition which occurred on 22 November 2001 immediately after the government formed.

The confrontation between pro and anti-liberation sections deepened when AL- led secular government was formed in 2008. The pro-liberation forces began to demand the trial for bringing the war criminals behind the bar. Consequently, in 2009 the

International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) was set up for the purpose. The legal actions against the collaborators worsened the situation of the polarisation. Between pro-Islamists and pro-secularists conflicts have been intensified, and violence is being systemised against each other in the name of the spirit of the Liberation War, and Islam.

Meanwhile, pro-liberal forces launched a movement called Shahbagh movement for their cause in 2013. They demanded capital punishment for Jamaat leaders Abdul Quader Mollah and others convicted of war crimes by the International Crimes Tribunal. They started demanding a ban on Jamaat-e-Islami, as well as on its schools, banks, clinics and other amenities. On the other hand, after the verdict of the ICT, anti-liberation forces reacted aggressively and threatened the AL government with civil war. The anti-liberation groups and organisations, especially, the Jamaat and Chhatra Shibir launched various violent protests and rallies⁶. Attacks on atheists and seculars subsequently became common occurrences in the country. The Jamaat, which is ally of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), alleged that the war crimes tribunal is biased. Shahbagh movement was symptomatic of the deeper divide in Bangladeshi society and polity. Further, the confrontations between supporters of pro-liberation and anti-liberation are being aggravated by the power politics of two main political parties.

VIII. ANTI-INDIANISM

The pro and anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh played a significant role to polarise the domestic politics of Bangladesh. Anti-India sentiment brought religion into the political process of Bangladesh. Since the historic support of India to the Liberation War of 1971 and 25-year Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty signed in March 1972, Islamist political parties of Bangladesh have been highly critical of Indian influence on Bangladesh. Islamists political parties and some leftist factions had criticised Indian role in South Asia terming as an "imperialist", "expansionist" and "hegemonic power." Anti-India sentiments became stronger when Bangladesh had faced socio-economic problems during the post-liberation period. The mismanagement of Bangladesh's economy and the free trade agreement providing free trade within ten miles of borders worsened smugglings of jute, rice and other essential commodities between the countries (Maniruzzaman, 1980:163). This situation had accelerated anti-Indianism immediate post-Liberation of the country. During post-Liberation War Maulana Bhasani was the leading voice to propagate anti-India sentiment. He led "Farakka March" in 1976, demanding to resolve the water issue between two nations and he also threatened in a letter to Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to organise a march to Farakka to demolish the barrage.

After the end of the first AL led government and assassination of Mujibur Rahman, the military-junta regime exploited and accelerated Anti-India sentiment to strengthen its base. The regime endeavoured to cultivate anti-AL, pro-Islamists, and anti-Indian sections of Bangladesh for its support. General Zia internationalised the issues between both nations and raised the voice before international Islamic organisations for international supports (Rahman, 2016: 380). As well as, he also wished to impress the Islamist elite groups inside Bangladesh. Water sharing, boundary dispute, transit route, illegal migration, India-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Chinese role in Bangladesh, shelling of natural gas are the same issues between India and Bangladesh, on which Political parties of the country are polarised. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Islamist parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami have always alleged that the AL is overtly pro-India and in the process has compromised Bangladesh's sovereignty. The Islamist parties and groups conceive India as a Hindu nation. They always projected India as the enemy of Bangladesh and Islam. It is perceived that the BNP and the Islamist parties are anti-India and pro-Pakistan while the AL is pro-India in their orientation.

In 1990s anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh became deeper due to the emergence of the Jamaat-e-Islami as "kingmaker." (Riaz, 2010: 54) Islamist political actors, who have been always against India, have got legitimacy in Bangladeshi polity. The Jamaat gave support to the BNP in 1991 to form the government, and in 2001 itself became part of BNP-led Four-party alliance government. The "25-year India-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship" has been termed as "treaty of slavery" by the BNP and the Islamist party. The BNP and the Jamaat relentlessly campaigned against the treaty and continued their anti-India rhetoric and opposed the "Ganges Water Treaty" signed with India in 1996 and the "Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord" inked with the indigenous tribal leaders. It has been propagating that the treaty would hamper Bangladesh's economic, environmental, health and security interest. They also have opposed the proposal of forming a sub-regional group consisting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and the north-eastern states of India. As well as they criticised the AL government's wish of granting India passage facilities through Bangladesh to move from its western wing to the north-east (Kabir, 2002).

During the electoral campaign in 2001, the BNP had threatened to cancel these two treaties if the party returned to power. However, it refrained from doing so after assuming the state power in 2001. The BNP and its alliance have also been opposing closer trade and communication connectivity with India. The BNP chief Khaleda's refusal to meet India's President Pranab Mukherjee, who was on a state visit to

Bangladesh in 2013, was another major symbolic display of anti-India position. The polarisation of political parties on pro and anti-Indianism have been working since the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Anti-India sentiments often are perceived as pro-Pakistan and pro-Islamist. While pro-India political forces in Bangladesh are associated with secularist and anti-Pakistan sentiments. The AL publicise that the BNP is an anti-Indian party. Veteran Awami League leader Suranjit Sengupta labelled the BNP as an "anti-Indian" party and asserted that: "There will be no place for any 'anti-Indians' in Bangladesh." On this statement Taj Hashmi (2015) concluded in this way:

The nation is already fractured and over-polarized; people having very little tolerance, mutual trust and respect for each other. Bangladesh can no longer afford further polarization of people between "patriots" and "enemies". Drawing the synonymy between "anti-Bangladeshi" and "anti-Indian" is not different from dogmatic Islamists' drawing a parallel between secular Muslims and "enemies of Islam".

IX. CONCLUSION

The polarisation of the polity and society of Bangladesh has negatively impacted the political process and development of the country. The country has become polarised based on secular-Islamist discourse and the process of democratisation in the country has derailed. The constitutional identity of being Bangladeshi narrowed the scope of interpreting nationalism in broader terms. The inability of the state to absorb pre-existing social formations led to the polarisation of the society. The political transition in the country from democracy to autocracy and again from autocracy to democracy created divisions in the political system and culture. The polarisation is the symptom of transitional politics in Bangladesh. During this political transition, the constitution and state institutions have been manipulated. Polarised Bangladeshi society (along the lines of the secular-Islamist discourse) has created space for political and religious violence which has ultimately led to a trust deficit among groups and political elites.

¹. Four basic principle of the Bangladeshi polity, namely secularism, socialism, Bengali nationalism and democracy are often labelled as Mujibism by the AL. It was crafted by Mujibur Rahman, first prime minister of Bangladesh and hero of the liberation war of the country.

². JAGODAL had large "official blessings" because its convenor was Vice-President Mr Justice Abdus Sattar, and its executive body dominated by ten presidential advisors. See, M. Rashiduzzaman, Bangladesh 1978: Search for apolitical Party, *Asian Survey*, 19, no. 2, (1997), p. 191-197.

³. It was a movement against military ruler Hussain Muhammad Ershad for the restoration of Democracy in Bangladesh.

⁴Ershd introduced eighth constitutional amendment which inserted a new article (2A) in the constitution that said, "The state religion of the republic is Islam, but other religions may be Practised in peace and harmony in the Republic"

⁵The government passed the Joint Drive Indemnity Act, 2003 which had provided "immunity from prosecution to the member of the joint armed forces for their involvement in 'any

casualty, damage to life and property, violation of rights, physical or mental damage' between 16 October 2002 and 9 January 2003." For detail, See, Death in custody, torture, arbitrary arrest and other human rights violations routinely ignored by government, The Daily Star, 8 June 2003 <http://archive.thedailystar.net/law/200306/02/index.htm>.

⁶.Chhatra Shibir is a student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Note: This paper is based on my M. Phil.

dissertation which was submitted in June 2016.

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