SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Secularism” or “no-secularism”? A complex case of Bangladesh

Abdul Wohab

Abstract: The incidents (in 2017) of changing the secular content of textbooks and removing a sculpture from the Supreme Court premises in Bangladesh raise a question among people who are sympathetic to secularism that Bangladesh is moving towards a theological state like Pakistan or becoming an Islamic country. They also refer to the remark that the current Prime Minister (Sheikh Hasina) made in 2014 that Bangladesh’s state administration would run under the rule of the Medina Charter (an Islamic constitution based on the Holy Quran and Sunnah, which aims to establish peace and unity by creating universal rules), as an indication of the religious characteristic that would remain at the centre of the state political activities in Bangladesh. By examining the historical and social context of Bangladesh since 1971 and reviewing the relevant contents of four newspapers—the Daily Inqilab (Bengali), the Prothom Alo (Bengali), the Daily Naya Diganta (Bengali) and the Daily Star (English)—from 2014 to 2017, this article rejects the claim made by the people who are sympathetic to secularism. This article, however, argues that Islam was traditionally/historically integrated in Bangladeshi society and culture as a unique (syncretistic) tradition in which political parties were forced to apply religious symbols and

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wohab is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and Sociology, North South University (NSU), Dhaka, Bangladesh. Prior to joining in NSU, he worked as a Casual Academic at the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work in Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. Wohab also worked in the area of Child Protection and Community Development projects at the Aboriginal Communities in the countryside of Australia. Wohab has a PhD in Sociology from University of South Australia, Adelaide and Masters of Social Work (MSW) from Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. His research works have published in international peer reviewed journals. He has presented his research works in different international conferences in UK, Turkey, Australia, Bangladesh and Thailand. His opinion and research outputs have also published in the daily newspapers in Bangladesh. He is currently working in a research project on youth involvement in the Internet violence in Bangladesh.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

These days the idea of secularism has received the attention of people across the world with the belief that the Muslim-majority countries have failed to accommodate secularism in the societal and political environments. This article attempts to refute this statement by presenting the case of Bangladesh where both religion and secularism have remained within the socio-political realm. Bangladesh, the fourth most Muslim-populated country in the world practices a “secularism”, which is different to the secularism practices in the West. Secularism in Bangladesh allows diverse religious practices in the public sphere, maintaining a functional separation with religion at the state level. Many academics and political commentators who are sympathetic to secularism raise the question of whether Bangladesh is currently entering into a “no-secular” phase or allowing religious organisations to function at state apparatuses, which was not permitted before. This article concludes by arguing that the presence of secularism in the political environment will remain, despite the ongoing questions regarding the future of secularism.
language in the political environments to stay in the government’s power. The article concludes by raising a question with the current integration of secular political party and Islamist force (Hefazat-e-Islam), being although there is a functional relationship remaining between secularism and Islam at the state level, is Bangladesh stepping into a “no secularism” era?

Subjects: Development Studies, Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Politics & International Relations; Social Sciences

Keywords: post-secularism; political history; syncretism; secularism; society; religion and politics

1. Introduction
In Bangladesh and abroad there are concerns that secularism, which was adopted as one of the four key state principles in the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh in 1972, more recently might have given way to an Islam-oriented political system. The incorporation of Islam-oriented state ideology since 1975 has raised questions not only about the rising influence of political Islam as a significant socio-political factor in Bangladesh, but also about whether secular democracy has any future in Bangladesh. This question further suggests that Bangladesh’s political climate may accommodate both religion and politics.

In the political climate, the above perception may have created another question—is Bangladesh entering into a new form of secularism or providing an indication of a society without secularism? This observation has become stronger among people sympathetic to both secular and religious views since 2013, when a general protest—the Shahbagh movement, also called Gonajagaran Mancho (People’s Awakening Stage)—took place at the centre of the capital city with a demand for the death sentence to war criminals. The Shahbagh protest led to a counter-mobilisation by pro-Islamist forces who partly denied supporting the genocide committed by the Pakistani armed forces during 1971. The Islamists, particularly the Hefazat-e-Islam, branded the organisers and supporters of the Shahbagh movement as atheists and anti-Islamists. Hefazat-e-Islam, a pro-Islamist force, opposes the Shahbagh movement because they believe that the movement is a secular platform encouraging writers or bloggers to be critical of Hefazat’s support for the blasphemy law. Hefazat also blames secular free-thinking writers or bloggers for making derogatory comments about Islam and the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him, PBUH), and threatened the Awami League (AL alliance government) with a counter demonstration if they did not stop the Shahbagh movement. It is worth noting, however, that the bloggers in Bangladesh were not all atheists.

The ideological struggle between the Hefazat and the Shahbagh movement have not only polarised the Bangladeshi society, but also provided a supportive environment for continuing their activities, which have gained political support. The AL alliance government reacted to conflict between secular and Islamist pressure groups by giving ground to Hefazat-e-Islam in several important ways. For instance, in 2013, the AL’s high command met the leaders of Hefazat-e-Islam, creating further confusion among secular political leaders within the AL and the members of civil society who are mostly sympathetic to the secular view. When the Hefazat-e-Islam promised bloodshed in April 2016 after the Supreme Court considered a legal challenge to the role of Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh, the AL alliance government remained a passive spectator. Many were surprised when the AL alliance government withdrew its support from the Shahbagh movement during this time. The changing political standpoints towards Shahbagh movement of the AL alliance government have been identified by many political commentators (Umar & Ahmed, personal communication) as one of the turning points of the political environment in Bangladesh where religion still remains as a significant part in politics. Within months the AL alliance government realised that they were going away
from the masses, which might be an obstacle for political success in the future. On the other hand, the AL alliance government support mechanism towards Hefazat-e-Islam has created further confusion among people sympathetic to secularism as the AL, a secular political party, eventually supported Hefazat-e-Islam, a pro-Islamist force.

In exchange, the Ameer of Hefazat-e-Islam and Chairman of Qwami Madrasa Board, Shah Ahmed Shafi, branded the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as “Mother of Qwami”, for recognising the Qwami degree, the highest degree equal to a post-graduate in the madrasa education system, in a rally on 4 November 2018 in the capital city. In the rally, top leaders of Hefazat, including Ameer, gave their full support to the political party AL at the election held on 30 December 2018. Receiving such opportunities from the AL alliance, the Hefazat, a Qwami madrasa-based organisation, was becoming one of the major political bargaining powers in Bangladesh. In an editorial in the Prothom Alo, it was argued that the AL, once a rival of the Hefazat, has become increasingly close to them.

This perception has created debates within the AL’s own political wings. For example, the Olama League, a pro-AL religious front, demanded a ban on Pohela Baishak (Bengali New Year) celebrations, which have been a part of Bengali culture and identity for hundreds of years. They argued that the Bengali New Year festival is haram (forbidden in Islam). They also urged the government to cancel the festival bonus for Pohela Baishak, saying the allowance should be provided to Muslims on the occasion of Eid-e-Miladunnabi, a birthday celebration of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In a criticism of the AL alliance government, the Olama League and Hefazat demanded the resignation of the Chief Justice, arguing that a Hindu Chief Justice—from 2015 to 2017 S K Singha was the chief justice in Bangladesh—in a country where 90 per cent of people are Muslims is an assault on the sentiment of religious Muslims. They also demanded the cancellation of the current education policy, which they said presents contradictions with Islamic ideology. In response, an eminent journalist, Abed Khan, a front leader of a platform against communalism and militancy, criticised the “Government’s role in allowing the Olama League to be part of a political party that carries the spirit of the Liberation War and Bangalee culture”.

Support for the Islamists has sometimes taken the form of opening support for Sharia Law. In this view, The Daily Star published news stating that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) slams Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who referred to Sharia Law in conducting a trial of the members of BNP and Jammat-e-Islami (JI) for alleged involvement with assaulting police during a protest rally against the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) law and the International Crime Tribunal. The BNP high command argues that the AL and its alliance have introduced a “double standard policy” that includes both secular and religious principles. The AL, a secular political party, has openly indicated that those who protest against the International Crime Tribunal, a tribunal formed for conducting investigations and prosecutions of alleged war criminals in the Liberation War of 1971, and those who try to save the war criminals would eventually face trial under the Sharia Law.

The subsequent references to religion by the political party may raise questions among people in Bangladesh of whether that religion may play a strong part in state apparatuses, and subsequently secularism as a fundamental principle of the Constitution may lose its importance/ground in the Constitution. Alternatively, secularism may stay in the Constitution, but people may not practice it in a similar way to what was expected in the drafting of the 1972 Constitution.

This article, therefore, analyses two incidents: changing the secular content of textbook and removing a sculpture from the Supreme Court premises due to the continuous pressure from the Hefazat. Despite this change, the analysis demonstrates that Bangladesh is prone to a syncretistic tradition where both religion and secularism function together historically. In Bengal (later Bangladesh), religious and non-religious traditions (indigenous and local practices) have integrated, which has built a unique cultural form. However, the current form of integration between
religion and secularism, particularly by the secular political party, has raised a question: is Bangladesh stepping into a “no secularism” era where the general public will understand society through the lens of a theological nature of religion rather than cultural?

In order to understand this complex relationship or interaction between religion and secularism in the Bangladeshi context, this article first explains the nature of the relationship between religion and secularism in a general perspective. This relationship, however, may seem to take a conflicting dimension since the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The trend of relationships takes continuous detours through the rules/regimes of different political parties, which is explained in this article. Finally, this article argues that both religion and secularism will remain centre stage in Bangladesh’s political environment despite this combination potentially creating a further question among the general public on whether Bangladeshi society had ever practised secularism.

2. Secularism and its historical context
The term secularism, which is coined by an English philosopher, George Jacob Holyoake 1851, is derived from the Latin word “saecularis” or “saeculum” and means worldly and profane. During the thirteenth century, “saecularis” and “saeculum” were used to refer to worldly objects and principles that were free from the domination of the church. The word secularism may have a different name, for example, the “Laicism” is based on a French word, which is used to identify secularism as well. This “laicism” was derived from the French word “laicite”, meaning the separation of state and religion.

Holyoake, the founder of the Secular Society in England, wanted a transformed society grounded in science and free from the bond of religion. He observed, “… the secularist concerns himself with this world without denying or discussing any other world”. In his understanding, progress is possible only through liberty or the removal of obstacles to freedom of thought, action and speech. Secularism condemned theology as superstitious and mischievous, and identified it as an obstacle to progress. In his view, secularism dispels superstition and the authority of religion over state affairs; it rationalises morality, dignifies labour, extends material well-being; and it allows for the realisation of the self-government of individuals (Holyoake, 1871).

The contemporary meaning of secularism has a long history, beginning from the medieval European theological understanding of Christian society to the modern European and non-European understanding of both Christian and non-Christian society. As Casanova argues, “the secular” is a “central modern epistemic category”, which has differentiated religion from secular views during the medieval European society. During this time, rationality and reason, particularly, have started emerging as new trends to make a connection between god and human activities. The new trends have also allowed human beings to understand the secular idea, which is different from the previously understood perception of religion and society.

The concept of the secular understanding, however, emerged during a particular time and context in history. The secular view has been carried out during the modern period both in Europe and non-European society through the secularisation process, which has been identified as “an analytical conceptualisation of modern world-historical process, and ‘secularism’ as a worldview” (Casanova 1994, p. 104).

Secularisation ensures a separation between “the secular”, which is state, economy, science, art, entertainment, health and welfare, and “the religious, which are ecclesiastical institutions and churches”. According to Casanova, the decline of religion and privatisation of religion are the central components in the modern world in the discussion of secularisation (Casanova, 1994).

Casanova (2011, p. 67) further argues that secularism is a worldview and ideology which has developed with the focus of modernity and modernisation, or it may be viewed as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be held unreflexively or be assumed phenomenologically as the taken-for-granted
normal structure of modern reality, as modern doxa or an ‘unthought’ (Casanova, 2011, p. 55). Casanova also indicates that modern secularism can be based on multiple historical forms depending on “normative models of legal-constitutional separation of the secular state and religion”, or “different types of cognitive differentiation among science, philosophy, and theology”. In this modern context, Casanova (2012) provides an overview of modern understanding of secularism: first as a statecraft doctrine, and second, as an ideology with a wider scope.

As it pertains to the doctrine of statecraft, Casanova states that “some principle of separation between religious and political authority [is needed], either for the sake of the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis each and all religions, or for the sake of protecting the freedom of conscience of each individual, or for the sake of facilitating the equal access of all citizens, religious as well as non-religious, to democratic participation”. From the ideological viewpoint, Casanova indicates that religion is “grounded in some progressive stadal philosophies of history that relegate religion to a superseded stage”. He further elaborates that sociologists generally hold that “religion is either an irrational force or a non-rational form of discourse that should be banished from the democratic public sphere”. The assumption here is that religion will decline with modernisation.

In his analysis of secularism, Casanova explains:

The secular emerged first as a particular Western Christian theological category, a category that not only served to organize the particular social formation of Western Christendom but also very much structured after that the dynamics of how to transform or free oneself from such a system. Eventually, however, as a result of this particular historical process of secularization, the secular has become the dominant category that serves to structure and delimit, legally, philosophically, scientifically, and politically, the nature and boundaries of religion.

In a comparable discussion on multiple forms of secularisation, according to Taylor, there are three forms of secularism. First, there is a complete divorce between religion or god and the public sphere, which has been practised in France with the name of “Laicité”, banning religious symbols in public schools and offices. Second, this form is mostly concerned with the declining nature of religiosity among the public, whereas the state may support religion. The best example is the UK, where people might not support religion or might claim themselves as non-religious, but the state is still supportive of the Church of England. The third form is a bit interesting, which leads to post-secular ideas. It says that religion can be one option of many for the state and public. What is meant by this is that religion has not been removed from the public sphere; rather it is a voice of a number of people. Religion can be accommodated by the state not as a single voice; but rather should be a voice of many (McConnell, 1985). In the South Asian context, particularly secularism in India, Bhargava (2011, p. 3) has argued that this secularism is not based on a “strict wall of separation”, rather on a principle of distance between religion and state. Bhargava (1998) and Casanova (1994) further demonstrate that it’s impossible for the state to maintain a strict separation between religion and secularism where multiple religions play a significant role. Indian secularism can be an example in this regard. In the Bangladeshi context, many academics (Riaz, 2010a and Ahmed, 2007) demonstrate that the relationships between religion and state are not a strict wall of separation, rather a functional relationship. This functional relationship, however, does not suggest an automatic departure from secularism, but rather implies that India and Bangladesh have developed a distinctly Indian and Bangladeshi secularism, which is different from the understanding of European secularism.

These discussions lead into three predominant aspects of secularism. First, the secularisation process attempts to take a leading role in the declining religious beliefs and practices in modern society. Second, secularisation attempts to encourage privatisation of religion. Third and finally, secularisation attempts to ensure a neutral influence between religious institutions and state apparatuses, although the nature and characteristics of relationships between religion and secularism in modern society remain a challenge, in which the understanding of multiple secularism is
required. Habermas and Taylor, after considering the diverse nature of religious influences on state and public institutions, indicate that contemporary society has entered into a post-secular society because religions are present in the public sphere through morality, rationality and the modern way of life. In this diverse range of historical forms of secularism, Muslim and non-Muslim countries practice secularism considering their own historical contexts. In the context of Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, secularism is understood from multiple forms in Bengal, and later Bangladesh.

3. Secularism and its function in Bangladeshi politics
When dealing with secularism, especially its diverse historical forms in South Asia, many scholars fail to understand its formation and construction in Bangladesh’s context. Present day Bangladesh, historically known as East Bengal (British period: 1757–1947) and East Pakistan (Pakistan Period: 1947–1971), came into being as an independent state in 1971. The nationalism or the national identity of East Pakistan from 1947 to 1971 has shifted from ethno-religious on the basis of belief in Islam, to ethno-linguistic on the basis of the Bengali language. Since 1971, in the post-independent Bangladeshi period, national identity or nationalism has shifted from ethno-linguistic to ethno-linguistic-geographical on the basis of changing Bangladeshi ideologies. This means that the national identity of Bangladesh has been determined not only by the Bangla language speakers, but also by its geographical location. Also, in the post-independent period, the concept of secularism has been defined and redefined in such a way that it drastically differs from the notion as understood in the West in the sense of religion being absent from state affairs.

Post-independent Bangladesh, the AL government under the leadership of Bangabandhu (friend of Bengal, in Bengali language) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (popularly known as Sheikh Mujib) as Prime Minister and later President (25 January 1975) began to rule Bangladesh soon after the surrender of the Pakistani forces on 16 December 1971 following the nine-month-long Liberation War. Within nine months of the birth of Bangladesh, the AL government introduced a Constitution incorporating secularism and banning Islamic-based political parties because of their alleged support of Pakistan during the War of Independence. In contrast, up until 1979 the anti-AL political and non-political forces who were sympathetic to orthodox Islamic ideology silently continued their religion-based politics. After 1979 they openly began to take part in national politics. Pakistani political elites had emphasised religious identity and an Islam-centric Pakistan, dismissing the struggle for democracy, regional autonomy, social justice and secular nationalism for East Pakistan.

The military coup that followed Mujib’s assassination in 1975 led to the end of secularism as envisaged in the Constitution of 1972. During the ensuing political crisis, it was Major-General Ziaur Rahman (popularly known as Major Zia) who finally took political control, which he retained until early 1981. In 1978, Zia founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a right-of-centre, nationalistic, conservative and business-oriented political party that takes an overtly hard-line approach to India, and represents a mixture of traditional Bengali customs and moderate Islam. Upon taking power, Zia’s government introduced a state-sponsored “Islamisation” process that impacted significantly on Bangladeshi society and culture.

General Zia replaced one of the four fundamental principles of the Constitution “secularism” with “Absolute Trust and Faith in the Almighty Allah” and inserted “Bismillah-Ar-Rahman—Ar-Rahim” (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) in the preamble to the Constitution under the Proclamations (Amendment) Order, 1977, as published in the Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary, 23 April 1977. Under Proclamation Order III of 1976 issued on 4 May, Zia revoked Article 38 of the Constitution, prohibiting the formation of religion-based political parties or associations. By changing the focus of the Constitution from secular to Islamic, the religion-based political parties could now participate in politics, a practice that had been banned since independence because of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and its controversial role and support of the Pakistani military during the Liberation War. As a result of these changes, secular nationalism was
undermined. Zia also introduced Article 25(2), which states “The State shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity”. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution on 6 April 1979 validated all proclamation orders of the government between 15 August 1975 and 6 April 1979.

President Zia and the BNP attracted defectors from other parties, including those who had opposed the War of Liberation and who had close connections with religious organisations, and whose agendas became a central part of the government policy. The military regime succeeded in bringing Islam into political discourse and public life, facilitating the legitimacy of the Islamists both constitutionally and politically. Zia’s government provided funding for religious activities and encouraged socio-religious organisations to flourish. The state-controlled media began to broadcast Islamic programmes and devoted more time to religious issues.

State-sponsored Islamisation continued under the regime of General Hussein Muhammad Ershad (popularly known as President Ershad), who seized power via another military coup d'état soon after the assassination of Zia in 1981. Ershad declared Islam the state religion in 1988, believing this would enable his government to remain in power over the long term. President Ershad and members of his government frequently visited mosques, mazars (shrines) and pirs (religious devotees) and announced important decisions at gatherings of religious scholars and supporters of religious organisations. Ershad’s ongoing promotion of the Islamisation process in Bangladesh was a “naked political ploy to use Islam as a policy of statecraft (which was) to gain more friends and allies among Islamic countries as well as to legitimise his autocratic rule” (Guhatkura, 2012, p. 291). The trend of state-sponsored Islamisation appeared to be a tool for attracting Muslim voters as well as garnering foreign support, particularly from the Muslim-majority countries.

On the whole, during the successive military regimes from 1975 to 1990, several measures were taken to promote Islamic values and traditions within formal and public arenas. Government offices and public places were decorated with posters carrying quotations from the Quran, displays of Quranic verses and the Prophet’s advice. At the same time, the government also allowed flying festoons carrying Eid Mubarak messages beside the national flags on Eid festivals, and the issuance of messages by the head of state or government officials on religious occasions.

Many argue that the success of the military regimes, particularly Ershad’s politics, were due to continuous support of the political and financial goals, for example, expanding roads and highways and decentralisation of power. During this period, financial donations from the Middle East and western countries for infrastructure development were channelled through Bangladesh. Despite political corruption, Ershad maintained relationships with pirs, mystic believers, the Atroshi pir, key orthodox Islamic believers and Deobandi madrasa. Mystic believers are considered to be a part of Sufi philosophy in Bengal, preaching Islam mostly without political purpose, but they became involved with the greater Islamic movement led by different Islamic organisations and forces. For example, the Farazi movement attempted to assert a Muslim consciousness based on puritan ideals of Islam, and emphasised only an Islamic identity.

In the political sector, the relationship between religion and politics continued to become more complex as a result of negotiations observed between secular politicians and Islamists. Early in 1991, the publicity materials and statements of party leaders show that the AL was interested in portraying itself as an appropriate defender of Islam in Bangladesh. During the democratic regime of Bangladesh (January 1991–2007), the two main political parties, the AL and BNP, wanted the support of Islamists, particularly the JI, either to gain power or to remove a democratically elected regime. Both parties became successful in gaining support from JI when they needed to form a government or organise a political movement. The BNP, for instance, wanted to form a government in 1991 with the JI when it required the necessary support in the parliament. This “marriage of convenience” was gone within two and a half years, after which time the AL drew JI support into their court to overthrow the BNP regime through a popular uprising, and this was also an effort to form a government. The JI returned
to the BNP alliance in 1998 and remained a partner in a coalition with BNP that came to power in 2001. It should be noted that the ideological positions of BNP and JI are different: the BNP holds a distinct Bangladeshi nationalist ideology, which is different from Islamism, whereas JI holds an Islamic identity, preferring to accommodate Islamic rules into the government or state apparatus. Despite their divergent ideological positions, the coalition was formed on the basis of political interest and the growing support of religion, particularly Islam, among the Muslim voters in Bangladesh.

Between 2009 and 2017, the recent political history of Bangladesh, under the rule of the AL, a 14-party alliance government has attempted to manage clashes between Islamists and popular movements in support of its stated policy of “secularism as one of the state principles” via a policy that aims both to preserve secularism and compromise with Islamist forces. The AL alliance government attempted to reform/reshape its stated policy of secularism during the period 2009–2017, which resulted in a mixed response from general public. During this time two significant changes happened under the influence of Islamists, (a) the alteration of the secular written content of pre-primary to secondary school textbooks, and (b) the removal from the Supreme Court premises in 2017 of a sculpture deemed to be “un-Islamic” by Islamists. These two incidents highlight the political nature and motivations driving the Islamist concessions, which can be understood that Islamists are not supported by the masses or by leading public figures. Even they were not able to alter the cultural practices related to religious observance among the masses, rather those cultural practices remained largely unchanged. Drawing upon the discussions and relationships on secularism and religion, many respondents (non-secular group, personal communication) indicate that the current AL alliance government’s position on secularism is apparently a contradiction to the stance the AL government had taken during the post-Independence period, which is to ensure the “functional separation” of religion from political institutions without initiating policies for “secularisation processes” of the West.

4. Secularism or Islamism?

4.1. Changing the secular content of pre-primary to secondary level textbooks

Perhaps unsurprisingly, on 11 January 2017, the media reported that Bangladeshi intellectuals accused the government of undermining secular and minority religious practices in Bangladesh by approving changes in primary and secondary-level textbooks following the preferences of Islamic interest groups. The Bangladeshi Government distributed 36.21 crore (around 362 million) copies of newly edited textbooks among 4.26 crore (around 42 million) students of pre-primary to secondary-level schools, creating considerable debate among intellectuals and media commentators. As an example, secular intellectuals point out that the poem “Boi”, written by a former university Professor Humayun Azad, was dropped because Islamists, particularly the Hefazat-e-Islam, wished to exclude the secular and atheist writer. Also excluded were articles by writers like Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel Laureate; Lalon Shah, a follower of local Sufi philosophy; Humayun Azad, a linguist scholar and Satyen Sen, a historian of Bengali literature. Secular intellectuals demanded an answer from the government on whether changing the textbooks reflected a negotiation with the Qwami madrasa Hefazat-e-Islam, and were a signal that they intended to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic country. Secular intellectuals also criticised Hefazat-e-Islami for their demand for the exclusion of some of the poems written by “Hindus and atheists”. In an interview with The Daily Star, a renowned academic, Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam, a retired Dhaka University teacher, mentioned that:

... a group of fundamentalists is working in the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), and under their influence and political affiliation, qualified persons are being sidelined resulting in many parts of the books being changed without the consent of qualified persons.

Islam also pointed out that:

Our rich literary canon has contributions of Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist authors and thinkers reflecting the fact that people of all religions fought side by side in our War of
Liberation. The omission of some writings by Hindu and liberal writers can be interpreted as the communalisation of education.

Professor Islam observed the government’s responsibility for the changes, as the Ministry of Education and the NCTB are under government direction. He asked: “If the government succumbs to political pressure, who is the political entity that is bigger than the government?” thereby signaling political corruption of the democratic process by these events.

In The Daily Star on 11 January 2017, a protest of 85 noted citizens was published, asking the government to withdraw the changes to the textbooks. The signatories urged authorities “to stop importing lessons through these textbooks to protect young learners from becoming communal and conservative”. The noted citizens also state that:

The deliberate changes in the textbooks were the result of regression and fundamentalism. There is a dangerous spread of communal politics behind this, which has been evident over the last few years. This year’s textbooks are the manifestation of compromise of the Government with communal politics.

Changing the textbooks created further tension between secular civil society and the government. Proponents of secularism argue that the distortion of history and culture in the textbooks reflects political motives in Bangladesh, which can work to spread communalism and support religion-based politics. Hefazat-e-Islam and the Islamist scholar and politician Fazlul Karim praised the government for changing the textbooks. In an editorial in the same paper on the same day, critics claimed that:

The defeated communal forces of 1971 have turned into a poisonous tree taking advantage of the political spinelessness of the ruling class. … [the editorial also mentioned] that the government was creating obstacles to the path which would lead the children to a world full of cultural activities. ‘Instead of inculcating morality in students’ minds, division and communalism are being created’ The biggest evidence of how the government is defeated to fundamentalism is the exclusion of articles by writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Lalon Shah, Humayun Azad and Satyen Sen from the textbooks, [they said].

Prominent citizens strongly condemned the politicisation of the textbooks, pointing to the government’s submission to religious extremism.

On the textbook issue, The Daily Star published an opinion piece stating that the textbook blunders represent an ongoing issue in the newly adopted 2012 curriculum of the AL alliance government under the 2010 National Education Policy. The article called it a great loss for Bengali culture and heritage, from which it would be hard to recover. The textbook alterations have attracted considerable criticism from civil society since. In an opinion piece, it was noted that “many renowned works of Bangladeshi literature were replaced by the works of foreign and less known literature”, which can be considered as a trend to include Islamic and non-secular content in the textbooks.

It is worth noting that the textbook controversy was widely covered in both national and international media. The New York Times published news with the headline, “To secular Bangladeshis, Textbook Changes are a Harbinger” in which Manik and Barry point out that the Bangladesh Education Ministry distributed textbooks in which 17 poems and stories were replaced at the demand of a group of conservative Islamic religious scholars who deemed those stories and poems atheistic. Among the significant changes, Manik and Barry note that:

… first graders studying the alphabet were taught that ‘o’ stands for ‘orna,’ a scarf worn by devout Muslim girls starting at puberty, not for ‘ol’, a type of yam; and a sixth-grade travelogue describing a visit to the Hindu-dominated north of India was replaced by one about the Nile in Egypt.
The New York Times\textsuperscript{46} also indicates that “the religious organisations now have a hand in editing textbooks, a prerogative they sought for years, suggesting that their influence is growing, even with the AL party, which is avowedly secular, in power”. The Deutsche Welle (DW),\textsuperscript{47} a German-based news agency, published a news headline, “Bangladesh’s secular activists concerned about textbook changes” on 6 February 2017, under which is it stated that:

Hefazat-e-Islam, an Islamist organisation, had demanded the Government to make the changes to the schoolbooks. The group, which seeks to implement sharia or the Islamic religious law in the country, has vowed to bring more radical changes to the education system in the coming years.

The Benar News,\textsuperscript{48} a Malaysian news agency, published the headline “Bangladesh textbook changes violate secular rules, critics charge”. Patheos (a religious and spirituality site, providing information and commentary from both religious and non-religious contexts) published news on the issue under the title: “In Bangladesh, textbooks are inching towards Islam: 17 works deemed ‘atheistic’ have been removed”. In Patheos,\textsuperscript{49} as a non-partisan and non-denominational news agency, Mehta indicates that Bangladesh, ostensibly a secular country, is becoming a theocratic country, heading in the dangerous direction of Saudi Arabia or Iran.

During the AL alliance government from 2009 to the present, madrasa education books were also changed. For example, the writing of George Harrison, a UK friend of Bangladesh during the Liberation War, remains; however, his picture has been removed from the cover page of a book for madrasa. Similarly, the cover page of the book represents young girls wearing the hijab and boys with payjama, a symbolic dress for prayer in Bangladesh. Many writings, including the Sufi philosopher Lalon and children’s author BiproDash Barua, were removed from the books, indicating that the government is heading towards a new political reality in which a particular form of Islamism has an increasing role in state policy. Momen\textsuperscript{50} observes that the AL failed to return to state power in 1991 because they placed more emphasis on secularism and secular ideas than they did on playing the religious card; however, that strategy changed after the 2008 election. In its second term starting from 2008 (first term 1996 since 1975), the AL has given more importance to religion.

4.2. Controversy surrounding the removal of a sculpture from the Supreme Court premises

The announcement of the removal of a sculpture (seen to be a symbol of idolatry by Islamists) from the Supreme Court premises on 25 May 2017 made media headlines across the globe, leading to accusations that the AL alliance government is surrendering to Islamist demands. The sculpture, a variation on the Greek goddess Themis, but wearing a sari and holding the familiar sword and scales of justice in her hands, was erected in December 2016 in front of the Supreme Court premises about 200 meters from the central Eidgah, a place where Muslims perform their Eid prayer. Most media outlets in Bangladesh published news with the headline “PM [prime minister] Hasina says she too ‘dislikes’ the statue at the Supreme Court” in a meeting with top leader of Hefazat-e-Islam.\textsuperscript{51} The Prime Minister remarked, “I do not like it myself. It’s being called a Greek statue, but how would a Greek statue get here? The Greeks had a certain kind of attire. However, there is a sari on this one. That too is ridiculous”. The statement indicates that the Prime Minister agreed with the Islamist hardliners, who had previously requested that the government remove the sculpture before the month of Ramadan (fasting). Within a week after the meeting with the Prime Minister, the sculpture was removed amid widespread criticism among the general public. Other newspapers also carried the story.

The decision to remove the sculpture from the Supreme Court attracted criticism within the AL alliance government. In a statement, the Cultural Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor commented that “the way Hefazat is making their demands, looks like Bangladesh is not a people's republic, rather it’s an Islamic republic”. However, in a statement, the Hefazat’s chief, Maulana Faruquddin Masud, indicated that “today the Islamic scholars expressed their solidarity with the pro-liberation
forces in the country, which will bring prosperity for the country". The Daily Star\textsuperscript{52} published a report on the issue stating that:

The removal of the statue has cast a dark shadow on our faces. It is so saddening that the party that led the Liberation War has given in to the demands that go against the very spirit of non-communalism, a core value of the war. Bangabandhu declared that there would be no use of religion in politics, but the exact opposite is happening now. The conduct of the government today is shaming us and letting our heads down.

After the removal of the sculpture, the Islamist groups thanked the Prime Minister in several processions at different places in Bangladesh. As reported in The Daily Star, Islamist groups also demanded the removal of all sculptures across the country. In reaction, a rally broke out in the capital protesting the removal of the sculpture, but police fired tear gas and water cannons to disperse the protestors, injuring around 20 people. The protesters referred to the incident as a surrender to Islamist groups. Left-leaning student organisations blamed the AL alliance government for compromising with Islamist groups in an effort to stay in power. In an interview with The Daily Star,\textsuperscript{53} Sultana Kamal, lawyer and human rights activist, stated that the removal of the sculpture from the Supreme Court premises did not surprise her because of the kind of "atmosphere created by the PM [Prime Minister] and her cabinet colleagues and lawmakers through their remarks on various occasions". She adds that:

It's part of a game. It's a compromise with conservative, militant and fanatic forces. It seems the government has taken a policy of conciliation with Hefazat. The Awami League considers Hefazat to be very powerful. It has taken the pro-liberation forces for granted, believing that they would cast their votes for the AL anyway. So there is no need to talk to them (the pro-liberation forces); but there is a need to talk to Hefazat. Such conduct by the AL is a compromise with ideals of the Liberation War. It is a matter of sorrow that the forces that can flex their muscles are actually winning. … They can lay siege to Dhaka and kill people; but we cannot do it. It is a deep crisis of democracy.

Educationist and popular writer Professor Muhammad Zafar Iqbal\textsuperscript{54} observed that Hefazat-e-Islam do not own the country, and yet they are dictating the terms to the authorities today. In an interview with The Daily Star, Iqbal comments:

It seems that the government has surrendered to Hefazat, most probably for the politics of vote. If we sacrifice our core values for the politics of votes, what's the point of such voting? Something ominous is already happening. This is a total surrender by the government to the so-called Islamist vote and also a clear government step to demonstrate its superiority over the Supreme Court. Hence, it is completely undemocratic and contrary to the spirit of the rule of law. The AL has become desperate for so-called religious votes and one need only wait to see how far the government goes to accommodate and give in to the medieval demands of the so-called Islamists.

A similar opinion comes from the artist Kamal Pasha Chowdhury,\textsuperscript{55} who comments:

We think its removal goes against the very spirit of the Bangladeshi culture, which is non-communal, and that of the Liberation War, which was fought for a secular Bangladesh. The removal of the sculpture incident will impact the psyche of the next generation, which will not develop love for artwork, the symbol of modern civilisations. We can see great sculptures in cities like Paris, Italy and Greece. We go to those places only to see the artworks. We are proud of our sculptures like Aparajyo Bangla [a sculpture in Dhaka University Campus]. There is no clash between sculptures and Islam. We can see many beautiful sculptures in Iran, Iraq and Syria. What happened in Bangladesh is that a certain fanatic group wants the sculptures of Bangladesh's Liberation War removed using religion. This is just the beginning.

International media published news with headlines such as ‘Bangladesh Muslims protest against justice goddess statue’\textsuperscript{56}; ‘Lady justice statue in Bangladesh is removed after Islamist
objections, \(^{57}\); ‘Bangladesh removes “un-Islamic” statue after protests, \(^{58}\); ‘Bangladesh: Lady justice statue removed after protests, \(^{59}\); and “Bangladesh PM backs radicals over statue controversy”, as announced by the Middle-East’s leading English language daily, the Arab News, \(^{60}\) The BBC published news stating “there is a growing tension in Bangladeshi society, and politics between Islamic conservatives and more moderate, secular voices who want to defend pluralism and free speech.” \(^{61}\) The Telegraph featured news indicating that ‘Bangladesh has a secular government led by Hasina, but the political influence of the Islamic movement is growing, and the decision was seen as a concession to religious voters before the national election in 2019.’ The Telegraph also published an interview with Professor Emeritus Anisuzzaman of Dhaka University, where Anisuzzaman points out that the act of removing the sculpture shows that the government was bowing to pressure from Islamist forces.

5. Islamism or secularism: politics vs reality?
Relationships between secularism and religion in Bangladesh context and the nature of accommodation of religion and secularism in state apparatuses by the political government have revealed a reality that indicates that Bangladesh, particularly the political government, uses both religion and secularism as its political tools for either returning to power or ruling the country. To further nuance the discussion, some added comments will be made here on the issues involved. In this context, the military-backed caretaker government ruled Bangladesh from 2006 to 2008, intending to topple the leaders of two major political parties, the BNP and the AL, and to hand political power to civil society or civil bureaucrats. The hidden intention of the caretaker government was to create a political platform where religion and secularism would not be a political tool. Therefore, they made an unsuccessful attempt. The AL and its allies won the national election with a landslide victory and formed the new government in 2009 with a two-thirds majority in the parliament. The mandate inspired the AL alliance government to fulfill the pledges in the election manifesto for re-establishing the 1972 Constitution, \(^{62}\) bringing war criminals to justice and tackling political Islam, specifically its Islamist off-shoots involved in violent terrorist incidents in Bangladesh. Many media commentators and academic scholars \(^{63}\) interpreted the victory of the AL as a clear rejection of state-sponsored Islamisation and of Islamist politics generally. The AL alliance government proposed that the judgment of the Bangabandhu (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) murder case would continue, \(^{64}\) the war criminals would face trial under the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) and the retrial of the jail killings case \(^{65}\) would proceed on Bangladeshi soil. The use of religion in politics would be banned to secure the rights of religious and ethnic minorities and prevent communal tensions among people of divergent faiths.

The AL also banned a number of organisations, including the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), a religious-based political organisation founded in Jerusalem in 1953 by Tokiuddin Al Nakhani, which envisages a sharia-based khilafat (caliphate) state with a political reach in more than 20 countries across the world. The Hizb-ut-Tahrir began its political activities inside Bangladesh in 2000 with support from UK-based Hizb-ut-Tahrir, coming under government scrutiny because of its anti-government activities in metropolitan regions. The AL government, moreover, banned a number of other smaller organisations, including the Hizb-ut-Tawhid, formed in 1994; the Islami Samaj, a breakaway wing of JJ formed in 1993; Ulema Anjuman al Baijinaat, an anti-JJ group that describe themselves as followers of a Sufi cult of Islam; the Islamic Democratic Party, formed in 2008; Tawhid Trust, a Kuwaiti-based RIHS funded by a foreign NGO, established in 2001; Tamirud-Deen, established by an Afghan war veteran in 1999; Al’ar Dal, Shahadat-e-Nobuwat; Ansarullah Bangla Team; and Al Markajul al Islam. All of these organisations had been connected with terrorist activities in Bangladesh in the previous decade. \(^{70}\) In banning these parties, the AL sought to inculcate religious courtesy and tolerance in the political culture of the country. Militancy and extortion were also to be banned. \(^{71}\)

The AL alliance government, however, faced enormous challenges from Islamic militant groups in securing their election promises. Islamic political parties and extreme Islamist groups were dissatisfied with the ICT convictions, worried that the changes to the Constitution meant their political ambitions would never be realized. At the same time, news reports sympathetic with
secularism showed that there was also dissatisfaction when the High Court rejected a 28-year-old petition calling for the removal of a constitutional provision recognising Islam as the official religion at the state level. The fear of Islamist extremism was also raised when speeches by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh referenced the Medina Charter as a means by which to protect minority rights and tackle Islamist extremism. The Medina Charter is an Islamic constitution based on the Holy Quran and Sunnah, which aims to establish peace and unity by establishing universal rules. An important aspect of the current political environment in Bangladesh can be defined by the conflict between secular nationalists and Islamists.

The AL alliance government, however, ensured the reinstatement of secularism as one of the state principles, while at the same time establishing a reciprocal relationship with the Hefazat-e-Islam, an obscurantist Islamist pressure group of madrasa teachers and students. The Hefazat-e-Islam came to the political scene in 2013 introducing a 13-point list of demands (see Appendix 1), including the introduction of a blasphemy law with a demand for the death penalty, the removal of laws protecting women’s education and rights, a declaration that members of the Ahmedya community are non-Muslims, proposal for a ban on Christian missionary activities, and removing sculptures in public places considered by the Hefazat to be “un-Islamic”. Despite the progressive steps taken by the AL alliance government, many media commentators and academics observed that the attraction to political power of a section of AL politicians has fostered relationships with Islamist groups. Hefazat’s rise has meant that the Qwami madrasa, once only a destination for the rural poor, has emerged as a significant political force.

The relationships between the AL alliance government and the Islamist groups have been observed by many academics and political commentators since the 2008 general election. According to the academic scholars (Ahmed, 2014 and Karim, 2014), the ideological basis (secularism) of the AL as a political party is moving away, particularly when they realise that the Hefazat is becoming a competitor among Islamic forces in the Bangladesh electoral process in opposition to the JI. The political commentators (Razario, 2016 and Umar, 2014), however, indicate the relationships between religion and secularism as a political strategy of the AL alliance government. That is, the efforts of the party also included returning to the idea of secularism introduced by the AL in 1972, which was a statecraft or state policy that ensures a functional separation of religion from the political institutions. There were a number of reasons for the AL alliance government to accommodate its position.

The fundamental reason was that Islam had historically been a dominant religion in Bangladesh, although there was debate on its integration with cultural trends in Bengal. There was an argument that the founding of the state was done based on specific principles under certain political upheavals where models from Western nationalism were drawn in and Islamic-based politics discouraged because of the particular association of Islamists allying with Pakistan during the war of independence, but soon after the situation was reversed to reflect more “normal” popular sentiments at large towards Islam. For this particular reason, the AL alliance government realized that without the support of this group of people, it would be a challenge to stay in power. Second, the AL alliance government realized that the JI remains as a political force despite using Islam in its political purpose. Therefore, in order to control the JI, the AL alliance government needed a counter-narrative. The counter-narrative was to accommodate religious forces into their political strategy. Therefore, it is evident that, despite the functional separation of Islam from political institutions in Bangladesh, the state has taken initiative to continue Islamisation through its political strategy.

The electoral process has also dominated Bangladeshi politics; for this particular reason, Islam and Islam (2020) argue that both Islamic and non-Islamic political parties in Bangladesh support electoral democracy and JI, particularly, is the largest religious-based political party that has been complying with the democratic political system taking part in general elections. The Hefazat, on the other hand, is not a political party, therefore, there is a rising concern presented by Islam and Islam that the Islamic political forces or groups may emerge in Bangladesh if the current
government fails to accommodate Islamic political parties, who supported democracy and hate “terrorism”. In this similar view, Lorch argues that when religious-based political parties fail to take part in the democratic political system, there is a possibility that “[a] (semi-) authoritarian rule potentially constitutes the strongest drivers” seat of the country. The current form of mixture of religion and secularism in the political environment by the contemporary political party is an indication of such a process in Bangladesh.

In order to further understand the relationship between AL and pro-Islamist forces, particularly the Hefazat, this article explores three daily Bengali newspapers, the Prathom Alo, the Daily Inqilab and the Daily Naya Diganto, and one English-language newspaper, the Daily Star, in the period from January 2012 to June 2017. During this time, local and international media published news and features on these issues, accusing the AL alliance government of surrendering to Islamist forces and organisations. Table 1 shows the number of newspaper articles that have referred to controversies between secularism and Islamists.

The table shows that secularism and religion have captured significant attention of people regardless of secular or religious view during the period between 2012 and 2017. In 2016, all four newspapers published a significant discussion on controversy regarding secularism and Islamist forces in Bangladesh a total of 193 times, in comparison to 137 in 2012 and 165 in 2013. The table suggests that the daily newspapers have become more interested in covering the controversy between religion and secularism after the 2013 Shahbagh uprising, with the total number of news and other features recorded at 165 in 2013, 192 in 2015 and 193 in 2016. The contents of this news feature may have implied multiple predictions within the general public mostly because they have not experienced such a surge of news and features on secularism and Islam in the daily newspapers. The published newspaper contents also depict that the current attempt at inclusion of both religion and secularism in the political culture by the AL alliance government is a new trend or a new strategy, which could be expected to attract more voters, despite the fact that many people raise questions about the future of secularism. In relation to receiving support from voters in the electoral process, the AL alliance government has considered the previous support of the Islamic political parties, for example, in the 1979 election JI received 10.1% votes, 1991 election 12.9% and 2008 election 4.84%. The AL government’s initiative to form a new strategy could be the outputs of the support of the Islamic political parties. Newspaper features refer to the current attempt to accommodate the political benefit of Hefazat-e-Islam with AL, a secular political party, which can be an emerging question on whether Bangladesh would ever practise a secular form of political environment in future.

Media and other public commentators have suggested that the intermingling of religion and secularism within Bangladeshi politics might signal that Bangladesh is moving towards a theological or Islamic state and will lose its secular character. However, this discussion has shown that there is a complexity in the relationship between religion, politics and the state’s policy on secularism, highlighting conflicts on this issue. In Bangladesh, orthodox and moderate Islamic ideology, Islamic extremists or violent Islamist organisations and secular atheist influences have all sought public support in diverse ways. Power struggles among political interest groups involve multiple perspectives, including pro-secular religious and non-religious positions, as well as a religious anti-secular position. In practice, political events have led to complex alliances and policies among secular parties and Islamist groups or organisations. To the extent that it can be said that religion and politics coexist in Bangladesh today, it is by virtue of attempts by the AL alliance government to draw a compromise among what often seem to be incommensurate positions about the role of religion in government. In this role of religion in government, some respondents (non-secular group, personal communication) indicate that the current AL alliance government’s position on secularism is apparently contradiction to the stance that the AL government had taken during the post-Independence period, which is to ensure the “functional separation” of religion from political institutions without initiating policies for “secularisation processes” of the West. With regard to this more recent conflicting position or deviation from the previous political stance, this
Table 1. Number of features, editorials and opinion pieces focused on controversy surrounding secularism and Islamist forces.

| Newspaper                        | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | To June 2017 | Total |
|----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|--------------|-------|
| Prathom Alo (Bengali)            | 35   | 42   | 35   | 54   | 72   | 18           | 256   |
| The Daily Star (English)         | 30   | 32   | 30   | 33   | 27   | 15           | 167   |
| The Daily Inquilab (Bengali)     | 41   | 52   | 33   | 60   | 63   | 19           | 268   |
| The The Daily Naya Diganta (Bengali) | 31   | 39   | 41   | 45   | 31   | 17           | 206   |
| Grand total                      | 137  | 165  | 139  | 192  | 193  | 69           | 895   |
article has attempted to refer to this position as an indication of the “no-secular” condition in Bangladeshi political culture.

6. Conclusion

Bangladesh has experienced a complex nature of politics by accommodating both religion and secularism in the political environment by the Awami League alliance government since 2009, and previously by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jatiya Party in a similar trend. The BNP and the JP allowed the Islamic oriented political party, for example JI, in the political activities along with the secular idea based political party, e.g. AL. However, the secular based political party, AL, after returning to power in 2008, has made good progress with the orthodox Islamic ideology, particularly with the Hefazat. This initiative has ultimately conveyed a complex message to the general people and politicians who expected that the political environment of Bangladesh would be more secular in nature. At the same time, this changing dynamic of political culture gives an indication to us that Bangladesh is moving away from its very own political tradition where both religion and secularism have been functioning together over four decades. Similarly, it can be argued that Bangladesh may attempt to enter into a “no secular” phase.

The initiatives carried out by the AL alliance government, for example, changing the secular contents from primary and secondary level books and removing the statue from the Supreme Court premises, is also an indication of increasing accommodation of religion in the public sphere. In the long run, through this process of increased accommodation of religion and secularism in the political environment, the AL alliance government has established a new dimension in Bangladeshi political culture, which is also an indication of a phase of “no-secularism”.

However, we have received a mixed response from the general public, which has been reflected in the newspaper articles and features. The newspaper features and articles also analysed the AL government, and demonstrated that despite the voter support towards Islamic political parties (1979 election JI received 10.1% votes, 1991 election 12.9% and 2008 election 4.84%), the general public does not care whether the political culture leans towards religion or secularism, rather, they are concerned about what happens in their everyday lives, and primarily their religiosity. Reflecting on people’s perception, this article has demonstrated that the government of Bangladesh, either secular or non-secular, has always ensured a functional separation of religion and secularism at the state level. This position of the general public might then be related to a notion that their religious feelings make average Bangladeshis susceptible to various political interests that seek to exploit religious sentiment for political purposes.

This perception further confirms that the Bengali Muslim tradition is strongly integrated with Bengali culture and society, and the religion-based Islamic political party may succeed at the political level in Bangladesh. This trend can follow Bhargava and Casanova’s arguments, which has indicated that in societies where multiple religions play a significant role, it can be argued that it may not always be possible to make a distinction between religion and politics. For example, according to Bhargava, Indian society is multi-religious, therefore, Indian secularism is “committed to a model of moral reasoning that is highly contextual and opens up the possibility of different societies working out their own secularisms”. For this particular reason, Indian secularism opens up the possibility of multiple secularisms. The idea of multiple secularisms allows both religion and secularism to play a role in state policy, with impacts on the public and private life in the case of the Bangladeshi population. This further indicates that Bangladesh may enter into a situation like that of post-secular society, where both religion and political institutions will remain together in the public sphere. Therefore, it is expected that the unique brand of Bengali Islam will continue, perhaps creating a new relationship with secularism in the twenty first century or “no secularism”.

Political parties’ use of religion indicates a complex nature in the political climate in Bangladesh. In this complex nature of relationships between religion and secularism, many academics argue that Bangladesh’s political climate has become more prone to Islamic ideology, which accommodates religion into politics rather than practising secular ideas. This notion, however, does not align with the Constitutional enactment of secularism, that can be continually expected to be maintained in the political climate in Bangladesh. Considering the multiple forms of secularism in
historical contexts of Bengal, it is pertinent to argue that the presence of secularism in the political environment will remain, despite the fact that there will be continuous questions on the future of secularism.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

Author details
Abdul Wohab
E-mail: abdul.wohab@northsouth.edu
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1434-7577

1 Department of Political Science and Sociology, North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Citation information
Cite this article as: “Secularism” or “no-secularism”? A complex case of Bangladesh, Abdul Wohab, Cogent Social Sciences (2021), 7: 1928979.

Notes
1. (Riaz, 2015), “The troubled democracy of Bangladesh: ‘muddling through’ or ‘a political settlement?’” ISAS Special Report no. 25, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.
2. An obscurantist Islamist pressure group of madrasa (religious based educational institutions) teachers and students, (Riaz, 2015).
3. A law imposed in accordance to Quran and Sunnah, however, the implications of this law may have been different from considering the social and cultural context of Muslim-majority countries, particularly Indonesia and Pakistan; for further information see, (Crouch, 2012), “Law and Religion in Indonesia: The Constitutional Court and the Blasphemy Law” Asian Journal of Comparative Law, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 1–46.
4. The 9th General Election was held on 29 December 2008 and the Awami League alliance formed the government on 6 January 2009.
5. The Guardian, 20 July 2013.
6. Personal communication during my PhD field visit, 12 March 2014.
7. This research has conducted in-depth interviews with political commentators and members of the civil society in Bangladesh during the period of February to May 2014 and January to February 2019. The total number of the respondents was 29.
8. A special school that instructs only religious knowledge based on the Qur’an (Muslim holy book), Hadith (Prophetic sayings), Fiqh (jurisprudence), Shariah (Islamic law), (Riaz, 2015).
9. Dhaka Tribune, 4 November 2018.
10. Momen, 8 May 2016.
11. The Daily Star, 12 April 2016.
12. The Daily Star, 12 April 2016.
13. Communalism refers to a division within communities along with religious lines or identity, (A. Rahman, 2007), p. 556.
14. The Daily Star, 1 July 2016.
15. The Daily Star, 12 April 2016.
16. The Daily Star, 12 March 2014.
17. English Oxford Dictionary 2016, Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2016 and Online Latin Dictionary, accessed 13 January 2020.
18. (Eliaze, 1987).
19. (Holyoake, 1896).
20. (Casonova, 2011), p. 67.
21. (Casonova, 2011), p. 55.
22. (Casonova, 2011).
23. (Casonova, 2011), p. 66.
24. (Casonova, 2011), p. 67.
25. (Casonova, 2011), p. 67.
26. (Casonova, 2011), p. 72.
27. Multiple forms of secularism or multiple secularisms are a condition in a modern society, where relationships among “state, religion and society”, have been understood and articulated on the basis of diverse historical contexts, rather than a universal category of history. The secular condition has also been considered as an analytical tool in understanding the plural societies in Indonesia and India (Stepan, 2000, p. 114; Calhoun et al. (2011, p. 4). For example, Bengal (now Bangladesh) once was occupied by the colonial power and they had always intended to explain the social and cultural aspects of this territory considering the European experience of secularism and religion (Ahmed, 1981). In respect of multiple secularisms, this paper argues that there are differences between understanding secularism in Europe and in the Indian subcontinent, particularly Bangladesh.
28. (Taylor, 2007).
29. (Habermas, 2006).
30. (Taylor, 2007).
31. Orthodox Islamic Ideology refers to a belief system within Islamist politicians, who want a pure Islamic state. Their key support base is largely within privately operated madrasa education Institutions, influenced by Deoband or Qwami style madrassa, (Riaz, 2009). p. 85.
32. Khan et al., 2009.
33. (Riaz, 2009 & Kabir, 2016).
34. Deoband madrassa envisioned a spiritual awakening of individual Muslims as well as a politically emancipatory movement for the community at large, (Riaz, 2010b).
35. Scholarly sources are supplemented by primary source materials, which were drawn from interviews with politicians from non-secular and secular political parties, as well as with academics, activists and media commentators. Twenty-eight respondents were interviewed, and they are prominent persons and experts on Bangladeshi political events. Interviews were conducted from February 2014 to May 2014, and again in January and February 2019 following unfolding political crises in Bangladesh related to the key argument of this thesis. 4 February 2019.
36. The Daily Star, 7 January 2017.
37. The Daily Star, 7 January 2017.
38. The Daily Star, 21 January 2017.
39. The Daily Star, 11 January 2017.
40. The Daily Star, 11 January 2017.
41. The Daily Star, 11 January 2017.
42. The Daily Star, 13 January 2017.
43. The Daily Star, 13 January 2017.
44. New York Times, 22 January 2017.
45. Barry & Manik, 2017, p. 1.
46. New York Times, 22 January 2017.
47. DW, 6 February 2017.
48. Rahman 2017.
49. (Mehta, 2017).
50. (Momen, 2016, p. 11).
51. Financial Express; bdnews24.com, The Daily Star & the Prothom Alo, 11 April 2017.
52. The Daily Star, 27 May 2017.
53. The Daily Star, 27 May 2017.
54. The Daily Star, 27 May 2017.
55. The Daily Star, 27 May 2017.
56. BBC, 24 February 2017.
57. The Guardian, 27 May 2017.
58. Daily Mail, 26 May 2017.
59. Aljazeera, 26 May 2017.
60. Arab News, 12 April 2017.
61. BBC, 24 February 2017.
62. The Telegraph, 27 May 2017.
63. The Telegraph, 17 May 2017.
64. (Pattanaik, 2008, pp. 983-984).
65. Secularism was a fundamental principle, which was overlaid by the subsequent political governments, and they replaced it with the faith of almighty Allah, (Riaz, 2015).
66. (Ahmed, 1990).
67. The Supreme Court of Bangladesh has given its verdict on Bangabandhu murder case on 19 November 2009. The government has followed its election promise by the completion of this trial.
68. The ICT is a continuation of the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973 (Act no. xix of 1973), which was enacted by the sovereign parliament of Bangladesh to provide for the detention, prosecution and punishment of persons responsible for committing genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other crimes under international law. In 2010 some significant changes were made to the Act, by way of amendment, in 2009 and thereafter, to end the culture of impunity in the government. Amendment to Section 3 of the Act, establishing the International Crimes Tribunal, was published in the official gazette on 25 March 2010. The tribunal consists of three judges, of whom one is chairman and two are members.
69. The jail killing case continued during the AL alliance government and the Supreme Court gave its verdict on 30 April 2013.
70. (Sarkar, 2013, p. 1).
71. (“Election Manifesto of Awami League”).
72. (Bergman, 2016, p. 1).
73. The Daily Star, 22 March 2014.
74. The Charter of Medina or Medina Charter was developed in 622 AD giving a solution to intertribal conflict between clans and tribes in Medina (Yildirim, 2010, p. 440).
75. Personal communication, 3 March and 21 March 2014.
76. Personal communication, 29 March 2014 and 25 August 2016.
77. Religion and politics maintain its separate identity in public spheres; however, they can function together depending on the circumstances. (Mohsin, A. (1984). Religion, politics and security: The case of Bangladesh. Studies, 8).
78. (Islam & Islam, 2020, p. 117).
79. (Lorsh, 2019, pp. 276-77).
80. Source: Prothom Alo; the Daily Star; the Daily Inqilab & the Daily Noya Diganta 25 June-7 July 2017.
81. 4 May 2016.
82. Bhargava 1998, p. 10.
83. Not having completed its secularist phase, Bangladesh is not yet post-secular.

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Appendix 1

Hefazat-e-Islam’s 13-point demands:

1. Reinstate the phrase “Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” in the Constitution as one of the fundamental principles of state policy.

2. Pass a law keeping a provision of capital punishment for maligning Allah, Islam and Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and smear campaigns against Muslims.

3. Punish the “atheist” leaders of Shahbagh, bloggers and anti-Islamists who make “derogatory comments” about Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him).

4. Stop killing, attacking and shooting Islamic scholars and madrasa students.

5. Free all the arrested Islamic scholars and madrasa students.

6. Lift restrictions on mosques and remove obstacles to holding religious programmes.

7. Declare Qadianis (Ahmadiyyas) non-Muslim and stop their publicity and conspiracies.

8. Ban all foreign culture including free mixing of men and women and candlelit vigil.

9. Stop setting up sculptures at intersections, colleges and universities across the country.

10. Make Islamic education mandatory from primary to higher secondary levels after scrapping women policy and education policy.

11. Stop threatening teachers and students of Qawmi madrasas, Islamic scholars, imams and khatibs.

12. Stop creating hatred against Muslims among [the] young generation by misrepresentation of Islamic culture in the media.

13. Stop anti-Islamic activities by NGOs, evil attempts by Qadianis and conversion by Christian missionaries at Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere in the country.

Appendix 2

Acknowledgement: This article has been derived from my PhD thesis. Therefore, I would like to acknowledge the University of South Australia, Adelaide, for providing scholarship for this project. I would also like to acknowledge my supervisors—Dr Shamsul Khan, Professor S. Aminul Islam and Dr Wendy Bastalich—for their guidance and instructions.
