INVENTING ISLAM(ISM): DE-ISLAMIZATION UNDER SECULAR AUTHORITARIANISM IN BANGLADESH

Md Ashraf Aziz Ishrak Fahim

Abstract: The presence of Islamism in Muslimistan necessitates a secular age, as only in a secular age does it become possible to be for or against Islam due to the decentering of Islam as the default organizing premise of Muslim societies. Within this fundamental de-Islamization or secularization of Muslim societies, further de-Islamization is made possible by secular power’s ability to dictate and even produce Islam, which continues to perpetually shift the meanings of secularism and Islamism in accordance with the European Enlightenment’s notion of progress. The banality and universality of secularism, and markedness and provinciality of Islam(ism), ensure that only the (perceived) absence of secularism and (perceived) presence of Islamism are felt – never the other way around. Bangladesh’s recent authoritarian turn, its social engineering during secular authoritarianism, and the recent calls for democratization – all point towards the secularist politics of de-Islamization which invents Islam(ism) in de-Islamization, and which then explains the failings of secularism through the regime and Bangladesh’s “Islamist character”. The implications include a never-ending de-Islamization process, spelling the end of the post-Islamism thesis, as post-Islamism becomes an impossible state. Secular power invents in post-Islamism a new Islamism, delaying the post-Islamist moment ad infinitum.

Keywords: secularism, Kemalism, banality, Islamism, post-Islamism, authoritarianism, democracy

Introduction

The mainstream account of contemporary Bangladesh tells a story, one which claims that secular authoritarianism in Bangladesh is fueling its Islamization. Some scholars and commentators even question the secular character of the regime (Ganguly 2019; Nag 2020; Hasan 2020). This study calls into question such narratives by critically examining the construction and reconstruction of the secularist–Islamist divide, which allows for Islam to be found in its absence. The “invention of Islam” thesis relies primarily on Taylor’s (2007) characterization
of the secularization process as transforming religion into a matter of individual choice as opposed to the natural order of things. This transformation of religion’s function, in the context of Bangladesh and other Muslim societies, is what I call fundamental de-Islamization, which also sets into motion the process of never-ending shifts in the meanings of the secular and Islam(ism) in Bangladesh, which makes visible the lack in secularism, even amidst one of the most coercive and violent episodes of secularization. This lack in secularism, called Islamization in dominant narratives, is contingent upon secularism being banal and Islam(ism) being marked; secularism is so banal that it is felt only in its (perceived) absence, and Islam(ism)’s marked nature forces one to discover it in its (perceived) presence, however negligible.

The second part of this article is devoted to exploring how such a discovery plays out in contemporary, “secular” authoritarian Bangladesh. I argue that authoritarianism as a tool for secularization comprises of three major overlapping stages: (a) the suspension of democracy, (b) coercive social engineering, and (c) (calls for) democratization. It begins with the suspension of democracy to create a form of democracy safe for secularism, i.e., to train people to make the “right” choice when the moment of democracy comes. It ends with democratization when all contestants, or at least all major contestants, in the political arena are secularists. This process of de-Islamization reaches its zenith with the identification of the secular authoritarian rule as an Islamist one, and the scapegoating of Islamism as providing justification for authoritarianism. It is where the link between de-Islamization, through shifts in the secularist–Islamist divide, becomes most apparent. However, since no degree of secularization is enough, the process – as the logic of de-Islamization dictates – will continue.

**Fundamental De-Islamization**

Charles Taylor (2007) identifies making religion optional as one of the key themes of a secular age. According to him, secularization can and does coexist with an intensification of religiosity. The important distinction between religiosity in a secular age and that before it is that, in a secular age, it is the individual who consciously makes the choice to engage with religion, whereas in previous times it was part of a tradition – the “default option” – that everyone, almost without giving it a thought, accepted (2007: 3, 12, 143). Based on Taylor’s conceptualization of secularization, Dalacoura (2018) claims that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is “a phenomenon of a secular age” insofar as it makes Islam(ism) one of many choices, and then relies on individuals, not customs or traditions, to make a conscious choice to accept or reject its program. Shadi Hamid, in the same vein, observes that in the pre-modern era, “[n]o one, then, questioned the
organizing premise that Islam and sharia were the order of things”, which changed with modernity and the arrival of Western ideologies (2016: 96). He asserts that Islamism displays modern traits. In fact, the presence of Islamism necessitated the presence of:

others – liberals, socialists, secularists, and nationalists – who, for various reasons, did not feel a need to base their political identity on Islam. ... If there were something called “Islamists,” then there would always be those who weren’t and were called something else. ... In short, Islamism was supposed [sic] to be different. It needed Gamal Abdel Nasser just as much as it needed Hassan al-Banna. (2016: 100)

Thus, insofar as Islam(ism) remains one among many options – or in other words, insofar as there is an Islamist–secularist divide in Muslimistan which allows for individuals to consciously choose between either option – we are still living in a secular age (to use Taylor’s words). That age does not become religious even if the majority of a given population chooses Islam(ism). Put differently, increased religiosity or presence of Islamists does not negatively affect the secularization process. The very fact that Islam has been debased as the ontological and epistemological foundation of Muslim society, giving birth to possibilities other than Islam, is the clearest sign of secularization in Muslimistan.

Salman Sayyid (2015) describes this opposition to Islam(ism) within Muslimistan as Kemalism, which seeks to dislocate Islam as the master-signifier of Muslimistan’s political order. Hatem Bazian (2018) calls this attempt at decentering Islam “Islamophobia in Muslim-majority states.” Both Sayyid and Bazian trace the origin of opposition to Islam(ism) to colonial encounters and their consequences, most notably the inferiority complex that these produce among the colonized.

However, scholars like Sherman Jackson (2017) and Rushain Abbasi (2020) argue that pre-modern Muslims did in fact distinguish between the religious and secular. The resultant implication of that claim might be that the Islamist–secularist divide in post-colonial Muslim countries, like Bangladesh, cannot be attributed to the colonial experience. But neither of these studies, which demonstrate the existence of a distinction between the religious and the secular in pre-modern and pre-colonial Muslim societies, goes on to demonstrate that pre-modern Muslim societies had a conception of secularism as some separation between the public and the private spheres, or as empowering individuals to choose between Islam and other ontologies. Put differently, such studies cannot challenge the idea that secularism as a social epistemology was foreign to pre-modern, pre-colonial Muslim societies. On the contrary, Jackson himself admits, while making a case for what he calls the “Islamic secular”, that:

www.plutojournals.com/reorient
Islam ... remains thus inextricably relevant to the Islamic secular realm. The Islamic secular, in other words, is entirely and permanently deaf to Grotius’s suggestion to proceed “as if God did not exist.” This is the most important substantive difference between it and the Western secular. And this binds the Muslim to perpetual, conscientious engagement with Islam as religion, even in the most secular of endeavors. (2017: 22)

While I do not attempt to present a genealogy of the Islamist–secularist divide in general or its manifestation in Bangladesh, I find it necessary to establish that secularism as the (default) organizing structure of society is a novel concept in Muslim societies which inaugurates the de-Islamization process, wherein even sincere attempts at Islamization reinforce the supremacy of the secular order. Against this backdrop of fundamental de-Islamization, I now shift my focus to Bangladesh’s further de-Islamization in a secular age.

Secularism cannot be reduced to a neat separation between the public and private spheres. In its bid to keep religion separate from politics, secularism must first define what religion is, thereby assuming the power to govern religion (Asad 2003; Sullivan 2005). Secularism is no monolith. In the West and India, for instance, secularism often functions as an instrument to institutionalize dominant religious practices and traditions by reinscribing them using secular vernaculars such as culture, law, and nation (Brown et al. 2013: ix–x; Oliphant 2021; Mehdi 2022). In Muslimistan, however, a different brand of secularism has gained supremacy. That brand of secularism – popularized by Sayyid (2015) as Kemalism – functions within the (neo)colonial reality not only to govern Islam, but also to actively attempt the removal of Islam, in a U-turn from Western or Indian secularism’s attempts to accommodate and/or preserve the religion of the majority by translating aspects of that religion in secular terms. While some Kemalists allow Islam to be reduced to and rebranded as a celebrated cultural artifact (e.g., Ahmad 1999), most Kemalists deny Islam as the heritage of Muslim nations, which Sayyid calls the Pahlavist strategy (2015: 71–2). Both types of Kemalists, however, insist on the supremacy of secularism.

Conceptualizing secular nation-building exercises in post-colonial Muslim-majority states as a Kemalist brand of secularism allows for a deeper understanding of de-Islamization within fundamentally de-Islamized societies. Kemalism forecloses the possibility of multiple secularities/modernities (see Burchardt et al. 2015) – wherein Islamism, or the presence thereof, could be seen as a different type of secularity/modernity – by positing Islamism as incongruent with the secular order. In Kemalist imaginations, one cannot be secular enough until one fully embraces Western secularism. And since Western secularity, like Western identity, is in a constant flux and full of contradictions, secularization of Muslim
countries like Bangladesh will perpetually remain a work in progress. No extent of de-Islamization can fully de-Islamize Bangladesh, as the meanings of “the secular” and “Islam(ism)” are constantly shifting, in a way that makes possible secularization/de-Islamization ad infinitum by inventing Islam(ism) ex nihilo, or in signifiers which previously signified the secular.

**Islamist–Secularist Divide in Bangladesh**

Although investigating the shifting meanings and politics of “the secular” and “Islam(ism)” in Bangladesh over the course of history would be a worthwhile endeavor, I limit myself to contemporary politics, specifically since 2009 (when the current, increasingly authoritarian secularist rule began) to illustrate how, under authoritarian secularist rule, the secularist-Islamist divide has shifted to enable further de-Islamization in Bangladesh through the invention of Islam(ism). It will also flesh out (aspects of) the mechanisms of de-Islamization under secular authoritarianism.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Bangladeshi politics was dominated by two major parties: Bangladesh Awami League, hereafter BAL, and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, hereafter BNP (Riaz 2016: 67–8). Formed in 1949, Awami Muslim League “clearly stated that the main objective of the party was to establish an Islamic social order”, but it later became secularized after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman-led secular elements within the party outrivaled the Islamist faction (Rashiduzzaman 1970: 576). The de-Islamization of BAL is most visible in its dropping of the word Muslim from its name. Ever since, BAL has been understood as the vanguard of secularism in Bangladesh (Majumder 2016). Yet the secularization of BAL, it appears, was not enough – it has been accused of overseeing the Islamization of Bangladesh (Majumder 2016; Hasan 2020), with Kamal (1990) and Riaz (2003) even hinting at the possibility of Mujib himself being an Islamist.

Arguing against the scholars who see BAL as a secular force, Mubashar Hasan (2020) claims that BAL’s supposed commitment to secularism is a part of its Islamization strategy, because BAL turns to Islam to justify secularism. The other justifications he provides for BAL being a covert Islamist party include BAL’s declared anti-Zionist stance, and its alignment with Middle Eastern nation-states (which qualify as Kemalist monarchies). Hasan fails to engage with recent scholarship on the co-constitutive relationship between the religious and the secular, which views secularism not as a separation between religion and the political, the state, or the public sphere but as a form of power that defines and dictates religion. Moreover, Hasan neglects the fact that even staunchly anti-Islamist regimes use favorable notions of Islam to protect their interests (Mandaville and Hamid 2018; al-Azami 2021).
Hatem Bazian goes a step further by arguing that Islamophobia in Muslim-majority states functions as the ability of the secular to produce the right Islam (2018: 34–5). While explaining BAL’s Islamic justification for secularism, Hasan does not consider the possibility that it exemplifies secularism’s ability to project itself onto Islam. Furthermore, even though any trace of Islam is tantamount to negation of secularism to Hasan, no mention of secularism – even if inscribed in constitution – can make Bangladesh truly secular (see note 6 to the chapter “The BNP, Ummah, and Politics in Bangladesh” in Hasan 2020). In arguing so, Hasan denies the possibility of a Bangalee/Bangladeshi secularity that is not Kemalist. His puritan secularism performs a role not dissimilar to Daesh’s takfiri ideology (cf. Kadivar 2020). One cannot become secular through self-proclamation, but must pass the scrutiny of secular Mullahs, also known as scholars, public intellectuals, or ideologues like Hasan. The rest are excommunicated; bedati (deviant), or murtad (apostate) seculars. However, Hasan does not extend that same power to Islam(ism) for determining what is truly Islamist, and what is not, when he from a secular gaze determines what counts as Islam(ism) and Islamization.

Ali Riaz (2003) and Sultana Kamal (1990) also portray a picture of Bangladeshi politics in which Islam(ism) is the hegemonic discourse within which competing political parties contest one another. Riaz cites the mere invocation of inshallah (God willing) in political addresses to argue that Bangladesh has undergone a process of what he calls “nationalization of Islamism” (2003: 301). If American secularism can reconcile with “In God We Trust” as America’s national motto (Fisher and Mourtada-Sabbad 2002), and Indian secularism can make peace with reinscribing Hindu religious ethos, telos, and quotidian practices as national culture (Misra 2004; Dasgupta 2019; Madhusudan and Mantri 2020; Mehdi 2022), then why can Bangladeshi secularism not have Islam as the state religion, Bismillah enshrined in Bangladeshi constitution, and political leaders use inshallah in their public addresses? Riaz does not consider this a question worth investigating.

The inability of such scholars to locate secularization in a robust secularization process can be traced back to the banality of secularism. Building on Arendt’s (1963) concept of banality, Oliphant (2021) explains how France claims to be secular while it remains entrenched in Catholicism. Being banal, in this sense, means holding the power to conceal its particularity and even presence. Catholicism in France has become able to unmark itself and therefore sneak into public spaces without causing any uproar in secular France, to the point where it arguably has redeemed itself in secularism. Islam, on the other hand, is marked as religion. As Oliphant puts it:

[w]hen it comes to religion, Islam stands in relief as the marked against the unmarked secular French. Catholicism, by contrast, is equated with the secular in
France through practices that make it isomorphic with the history and culture of France and Europe. Catholic material forms, figures, and practices occupy monumental spaces in Paris. They rise above the skyline, and they provide the names of many of the streets, passageways, and metro stations. (2021: 5)

In secular Bangladesh, what is considered secular at any given moment is made banal and unmarked, making it impossible for scholars to find secularization and secularity, whereas the marked nature of Islam(ism) means that even a negligible trace of it can be construed as Islamization. The pervasive banality of secularism is why Md Nazrul Islam and Md Saidul Islam (2018) fail to question how the meanings of Islamism and secularism are constituted and reconstituted, even as they attempt to critique secular authoritarianism and the narratives justifying it. Like Riaz, they also credit Mujib as the initiator of the Islamization process, whereas Mujib was at best a Bangalee/Bangladeshi secular, if not merely undoing some of the de-Islamization processes (see Ahmad 1999).

Mainstream literature is even harsher on BNP. It is presented as a center-right political party that has sincere sympathy for Islam(ism). BAL’s exploitation of “Islamist” vernacular is often seen as a tactical move, whereas BNP’s commitment to “Islamism” is considered intrinsic (Riaz 2003: 312–13). In scholarship on Bangladesh, a left/right dichotomy in politics is drawn based on one’s perceived stance towards Islam(ism): secularists are left-wing, and Islamists right-wing. Ali Riaz, for instance, categorizes all Islamist parties as right-wing and all secularist parties as left-wing, with BAL being a centrist for its insistence on “limited role of religion in politics”, and BNP being center-right for viewing “Islam as a central element of social and political life” (2016: 66). Nevertheless, Rounaq Jahan finds that BNP “accommodate[d] in its fold both the left and the right […] and] co-opted leftist rhetoric and slogans” (2005: 243–5). Riaz and other scholars do not offer any explanation as to why BNP’s commitment to Islam(ism) should be considered genuine and BAL’s tactical or less genuine. Islam and Islam (2018) demonstrate, for instance, that BNP under Ziaur Rahman only institutionalized the “Islamization” process that Mujib inaugurated.

In summary, Islamism as a phenomenon of the secular age started with Mawdudi and his Jamaat-e-Islami’s opposition to the Muslim League, whose non-Islamist or secular character allowed Mawdudi and his party to be Islamist (Ahmad 2009; Qasmi 2017; Sayyid 2017). The secular Muslim League eventually became Islamist, not because Mawdudi’s criticisms of the Muslim League were no longer relevant, but because of a shift in the meaning of the secular and Islam which posited BAL as the “secular” alternative to the “Islamist” Muslim League. Now, another shift has brought the secular character of BAL into question, and BNP, more secular than the Muslim League was in the 1940s when Mawdudi first
aired his criticisms of it, is presented as the unequivocally Islamist(-leaning) party in the secularist–Islamist divide.

**De-Islamization under Secular Authoritarianism**

I have established that the secularist/Islamist divide in post-colonial, Muslim-majority Bangladesh is itself a testament to the fundamental de-Islamization of Bangladesh, wherein Islam has lost its unquestioned hegemonic status, and that this divide plays itself out through a series of negations understood as de-Islamization. These negations oversee perpetual shifts in the meaning of the secular and Islam, by inventing Islam(ism) and Islamization in secularity and secularization. Now, I turn to how the process of secularization through the invention of Islam(ism)/Islamization occurs in the specific context of secular authoritarianism in Bangladesh, involving three overlapping and complementary stages: (1) the suspension of democracy to safeguard the Kemalist nation-building project, (2) the coercive social engineering, and (3) (calls for) the restoration of democracy. These stages are overlapping and complementary because, as we shall see, all three mechanisms are in play within each stage. Elements of social engineering can be found in the suspension of democracy and in calls for the restoration of democracy. Likewise, calls for the suspension of democracy may also come in the form of calls for restoration of democracy, and vice versa.

M. M. Akash, an Economics professor at the University of Dhaka and senior leader of the far-secularist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), lucidly lays out this template for de-Islamization in a 2015 opinion piece, arguing that:

> come what may, progressive pro-liberation forces [secularists] should not obstruct BAL’s attempt to weaken and exhaust … reactionary, terrorist forces [the Islamists] by unleashing the brute force of the state on them. … At the same time, […] secularists] should continue their struggle against BAL’s reconciliatory approach [towards Islamists], corruption, unnecessary excesses, and fascist tendency so that, in a future election, both the ruling party and the opposition are from the pro-liberation [secularist] camp.

**Suspending democracy:**

In Bangladesh, the secular nation-building project is often justified using Bangladesh’s war of independence, which is said to have fought against Islam(ism), represented by Pakistan, and for secularism, represented by Bangalee nationalism (Islam and Islam 2018). This narrative gained momentum after BAL returned to power in 2009 and government decided to prosecute Jamaat-e-Islami leadership under the pretext of trying war criminals (Islam 2011a, 2011b). The
The war crime trials saga reached its zenith in 2013 with extreme polarization in the country, deepening the secularist–Islamist divide (Majumder 2016; Murshid 2016). Secularist activist-academic Humayun Kabir (2013) aptly sums up the secular motivation behind the state-sponsored Shahbagh sit-in against their out of power opposition in 2013:

The fight is over the very soul and identity of Bangladesh. ... Jaamat, to put it mildly, has a very authoritarian vision [... where] you would not be able to kiss your lover openly. But in Shahbagh you can. ... Jaamat represses love, sex, and freedom. Shahbagh inspires you.

Before, during, and after the 2014 national elections, Bangladesh witnessed fierce debate on democracy and secularism, with several prominent secularists suggesting that democracy be shelved till forces “repress[ing] love, sex, and freedom” are eliminated from the political process. While Islamists supported democracy and democracy would have made the BNP-Jamaat alliance victorious, Sen (2014), using the Rawlsian notion of “reasonable pluralism”, argued for a new social contract which would ensure that the political system remained closed to Islamists but will nevertheless remain pluralist. Similarly, Hossain (2014) floated the concept of “democratic dictatorship” in which democratic rights would be enjoyed by those he terms “the people” and dictatorship would be imposed upon Islamists – the underlying assumption being that Islamists are non-people.

Ultimately, in 2013, the High Court revoked Jamaat’s Election Commission registration, rendering the party ineligible for contesting in elections (Al Jazeera 2013). The opposition alliance, largely viewed as (pro-)Islamist, boycotted the 2014 general elections as they believed that the rules of the game privileged the ruling coalition. BAL won more than half the parliamentary seats uncontested (Riaz 2016: 68). Many secularist activists and scholars viewed this as a necessary evil to defeat the Islamist threat. As secularist activist Foring Camelia (2014), with over 90,000 followers on Facebook, wrote:

When the opposition party is Jamaat, I do not want democracy. If BNP abandoned Jamaat, I would certainly not have accepted this [farcical] election... Sometimes, one has to accept small crimes to prevent bigger ones. I am surrendering my right to vote to defeat [Islamist] Rajakars.

Similarly, Ali Riaz testified before the United States Congress that the US must protect Indian interests in the then-upcoming elections in Bangladesh: “[i]n particular[,] India’s valid security concerns must be addressed. Institutional structures should be created to ensure that domestic political environment in
Bangladesh does not threaten its neighbor or the regional security” (Wilson Center 2013). Insofar as the BAL represents the secularists (Majumder 2016), as well as the pro-Indian lobby (Chakma 2015), Riaz’s testimony translates into an appeal for the suspension of democracy in favor of a particular brand of secularism, one which is set up in opposition to what is considered Islam in Bangladesh.

Suspending democracy to make democracy safe for secularism is not a novel phenomenon in Muslim-majority countries. While Fareed Zakaria (2003) advocates for this policy across the globe, Muslimistan has been most receptive to his ideas, even before he articulated them (Hamid 2014). Amr Hamzawy’s (2017) mapping of secular-liberal narratives regarding secularist oppositions to democracy in Egypt following the Arab Spring is strikingly familiar, considering the similar narrative Bangladeshi secularists propelled at the time. Narratives of sequentialism are particularly pertinent here. The difference lies in the fact that the BNP – who secularists assumed would come to power if a free and fair election were held – is not, and never was, an Islamist movement. This raises the question when secularists would consider the sequence complete. If having the BAL and BNP, both with no Islamist roots in comparison to Ennahda in Tunisia or AKP in Turkey, as the main parties in a two-party system cannot guarantee that democracy is now safe for secularism, what can? This is congruent with, and, in fact, strengthens my argument that de-Islamization invents Islam in its absence since only the existence of Islam can necessitate the existence of a secularization process. Secularism needs Islamism as much as Islamism needs, as Hamid (2016) argues, secularism to justify its presence.

Social engineering

Suspending democracy is not enough. In fact, proposals put forward by Sen (2014), Hossain (2014), Iqbal (2014), and Akash (2015) reveal that secularists were never against democracy per se; their contention with democracy came from their notion of demos – who should be counted as the people – or from the outcome that democracy would generate if universal adult suffrage were afforded to all Bangladeshis. They had no preference for an authoritarian political system, but rather dreaded Islamists’ inclusion in the political system – especially with a population which is overwhelmingly “(pro-)Islamist”. In an ideal world, secularists would rather a (liberal) democratic Bangladesh, in which both the government and the opposition would be secularists.

Their vision is to allow the government to crack down against Islamists, in order to eliminate the irreconcilable Other, while simultaneously protesting against what Akash (2015) called the regime’s “fascist tendencies”. This would create a new political reality, in which the ideal secular political order would come to fruition: both the government, which in this case would be the BAL, and the
opposition being in the secularist camp. This secular dictatorship would engineer a Bangladeshi society where democracy is safe for secularism. When the moment of democracy comes, the people would not make the wrong choice, i.e., give power to the Islamists.

The social engineering process under secular authoritarianism in Bangladesh, therefore, includes (but is not necessarily limited to):

(a) Erecting a secular alternative to the ruling authoritarian secular party,
(b) Ensuring that only secularists can oppose the regime without suffering any meaningful consequences,
(c) Gradually changing what it means to be Islamist, to the point where what being a secularist meant before will instead signify being an Islamist,
(d) Explaining the regime’s authoritarian turn through its supposed Islamist turn, thereby retaining the purity of secularism and the secularists,
(e) Including (fringe) Islamists (sporadically), radically limiting their say over the direction the country takes while giving secularists the illusion of inclusivity, and finally,
(f) Projecting secular policies as default, neutral policies to be implemented no matter which type of government – authoritarian or democratic – is in power, giving immunity to secular forces working with the authoritarian regime to implement their favored policies. Contrastingly, policies and stances favored by Islamists are carefully provincialized and, therefore, any consideration or adoption of such policies is considered a collusion between Islamists and the regime.

In recent years, a flurry of literature criticizing the regime has emerged. It may appear that the secularist camp, which threw itself behind the BAL in 2013, has learnt a lesson and withdrawn its support for the strong one-party state that it helped come into being (Roy 2018; Murshid 2016). However, a deeper look at secularist criticisms of the government reveals that the focal point of their critique is the regime’s supposed Islamist turn; it is an Islamist turn, not authoritarian rule per se, that is the most pressing problem (Ganguly 2019; Nag 2020). Meanwhile, the main opposition BNP has been taken over by the secularist camp, as the secularist apostle Kamal Hossain took the helm of the opposition coalition with the 2018 elections only months away (Al Jazeera 2018; Siddiqui 2018; Ahasan 2018). Neither the secularist opposition to the authoritarian BAL regime, nor the secularist alliance with BNP (contingent upon distance from Islamists) departs from Akash’s (2015) policy prescriptions which necessitated the suspension of democracy in Bangladesh. All that this shows is that secularists are attempting to create an alternative to the ruling party in their own image, so that democracy is made safe for a secularism which cements the exclusion of Islamism from the political process.
The secularist takeover of BNP prior to the 2018 elections ensured that any *legitimated* opposition to the government remained within the secular monopoly. However, as the logic of secularization/de-Islamization suggests, doing this is not enough. To ensure that the entire political spectrum continues the tilt towards a secularist position, which itself is ever-evolving in tandem with changes in modern, secular, and Western sensibilities, the pressure to further secularize must always be there. The ever-changing meaning of Islamism ensures that no matter how secular a party, society, or political system is, there is always scope for improving one’s secular character – secularism is an ideal that is not to be realized in this world but can and should constantly be striven for. This, in a sense, is similar to what Sayyid (2014) says regarding Islam and actualizing it in an imperfect, mortal world. As such, not only the BNP, but the whole political system of Bangladesh, including the ruling BAL, can be characterized as Islamist (see Hasan 2020; Riaz 2003). It is in this context that I place assertions of Bangladesh being Islamized under a secular ruling party, as Lorch (2018) suggests.

The degree of support that the BNP received prior to the 2018 elections from Bangladesh’s secularists, who have recently revived their love for democracy, was contingent upon BNP distancing itself from Islamists (The Daily Star 2018) – although BNP is still considered as pro-Islamist. The gradual shift in the meaning of Islamism means that what was considered as secular yesterday is today considered as Islamist today and, therefore, the balance must still be found somewhere in between. This pseudo balancing act between two poles is a mechanism of the secularization process, which continues *ad infinitum*.

The insistence on opposition remaining within the secular monopoly serves a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it ensures that the political system remains closed to Islamists and continues to tilt further towards secularists, while, on the other hand, it allows secularists to be viewed as the opposition rather than accomplices in a tyrannical rule. Furthermore, as secularists continue to support the authoritarian system – allegedly not out of volition but out of compulsion as anti-government mobilization by Islamists must be rejected due to fears of reprisal – Islamists are forced to review their traditional pro-democracy stance as documented by Fair and Patel (2020) and enter negotiations with the regime. These, in turn, are used by secularists to showcase that the regime is in bed with Islamists, that Islamists are the beneficiary of and provide justifications for authoritarianism, and that the regime is corrupt and evil because it is Islamist.

This poses a dilemma to Islamists: if they retain their pro-democracy stance, secularists will only be too happy to have them crushed by providing intellectual, cultural, social, and political justifications for unleashing state machinery on them, allowing the secularists to gain even more influence over the regime, as well as the political system in general. On the other hand, if they do not mobilize and enter
negotiations with the regime to ensure their own survival, they are branded as fascist-enablers. In this regard, Tuhin Khan (2021), a Dhaka-based activist, writes in a Facebook post:

When [Islamist] Hefazat stays quiet [about the authoritarian rule], they are actually in a negotiation with the government. You [the secularists] negatively portray this negotiation to cast a doubt on [...] Islamists'] morality and ask the government to sever ties with them. Everyone negotiates with the government. But when [Islamist] Hefazat does that, it becomes a problem as they, then, receive the government’s blessings. Madrassa students get recognition, the ulema gain clout in government, and those who culturally prefer Islam are empowered. As such, you [secularists] get distanced from the government. That is why [Islamist] Hefazat then gets branded as fascist enablers. But, if [Islamist] Hefazat takes to the street, you become fearful of an [Islamist] Hefazat takeover. Consequently, you oppose them even if they oppose the regime.

The impossibility of mobilizing against authoritarianism from an Islamist perspective is crucial in allowing secularists to put the blame of the regime’s authoritarian tendency on Islam, although the secularists could make that claim even in the absence of any Islamist–regime negotiation, if we follow Riaz (2003) and Hasan’s (2020) logics. By explaining authoritarianism or authoritarian turn as an essential feature of Islam(ism) and Muslim societies, secularists maintain secularism’s integrity and purity. If a secular party or system is failing, that is because that party or system has not been able to be secular enough. Alternatively, Bangladesh’s poor performances are explained through its Muslim/Islamic character, while its successes are presented as a result of its secular credentials.

To be sure, the choice between secularism and democracy, often thought of as going hand in hand, is not an easy one to make – however, while I have already stated that secularists are not necessarily opposed to the idea of a democratic polity, Islamists are not welcome in their imagination of demos. SECularists want a pluralist, open, neutral political system, and extend this vision to public space as Habermas (1989) articulates. However, as is the case in Habermas’s argument, their design for this vision contains and perpetuates familiar problems: to attain and preserve the enlightened public space that is the secularist political arena, it was crucial to exclude and suppress “irrational” Islamists (for a thorough critique of the idea of a neutral public sphere, see Calhoun 2010). The question is not so much about democracy as it is about (re)drawing the boundary of the demos: “democratic political institutions are more likely to develop and endure in a country that is culturally fairly homogeneous and less likely in a country with sharply differentiated and conflicting subcultures” (Dahl 1998: 149).
This is consistent with contradiction inherent in democracy: “rule by the people” does not include in its articulation the people outside the boundary of the state, yet to be born, and foreigners; this, according to Bell (2015), is “the tyranny of the voting community”. Islamists, in the secularist imagination, are at best resident foreigners, if not insurgents to be deported to their imaginary place of origin; they can be tolerated, but never given access to the political system. However, since it is not possible to maintain the façade of democracy while disenfranchising the majority of the population in a nation-state, secularists must opt for dictatorship, as Hussein (2014), situating Egyptian liberals’ support for overthrowing democracy using the military within the secular-liberal tradition, explains:

Enlightenment philosophes were prepared to make a spoken or unspoken agreement with authoritarian interests, promising obedience and loyalty as long as core liberal values such as freedom of expression over private beliefs were maintained, at least those opinions that would not trouble the security of the state.

**Restoration of democracy**

Siding with despots comes at a high social cost: it becomes increasingly difficult to retain the moral high ground. Moreover, the exclusionary nature essential to the making of a secular-liberal space and its simultaneous contradictory promises for equality and non-discrimination make the status quo untenable. Therefore, to reduce this tension, secularism offers an inclusive/pluralist political project in which Islamists are often accepted superficially but in limited control over their lives, say in writing the rules of the game, thereby securing their position as consumer instead of participants in society (for a discussion on Islamist moderation through repression see Hamid 2014). They are prevented from working towards the process of “folding the critique of the Enlightenment project into a practice in which [its] target is defined in terms of challenging the story of our political present (and thus of our prospects for alternative political futures) according to which there is a single horizon towards which it is desirable for us all [sic] to head” (Scott 1996: 22).

Islamists, in this “inclusivist/pluralist” framework, find themselves having to unbecome Islamists to survive and be successful within the system. Failing to do so, they are made out to be superstitious and uneducated beings suffering from the poverty of aspiration and in need of guidance from enlightened secularists to join the carefully defined march of “progress”, or are considered as a problem to be tolerated, tamed, and gradually gotten rid of by allowing them such a limited space in politics that their efforts could not disrupt the overall secular structure of society while their negligible presence still legitimizes the political system. Shifting the
focus from Islamism as an ideology to Islamists as bodies allows for the illusion of inclusivity in exclusion. The way ideology and identity are meshed into this context helps solidify the claim that Islamists are not discriminated against in this policy of inclusion. (Many Islamists find in this pseudo-inclusive framework a ray of hope in the protection of their rights, as is the case with the founders of Amar Bangladesh Party, a point to which I later return). However, Sayyid reminds us of the dangers in shifting the focus from Islam to Muslims, which, in this context, could be applied to the Islamism-Islamist case. As he writes:

[w]ithout Islam, there would not be any more Muslims. This does not mean that those who are Muslim beings would vanish from the earth but, simply, being Muslim would no longer be possible. (2014: 3)

Mawdudi holds similar qualms about Muslim League’s idea of Pakistan (Qasmi 2017). The Muslim League wanted to ensure Muslim rights are solidified as understood in secular terms, which has resulted in Pakistan becoming yet another one of many Kemalist states (Sayyid 2017). The insistence on the rights of Muslims ignores the fact that there cannot be any Muslims without Islam. The empowerment of Muslims must be understood in their own terms, i.e., in Islamic terms. However, since the idea of Muslim rights is fundamentally detached from Islam, a new “Islam” emerges comprised of Muslims as a population, perceived in ethnic terms, and the fight against “Islamophobia” becomes one based around that invented Islam (see also Murad 2020: 36).

Applying this argument to the case of Islamist beings illustrates that including Islamists in the political system – or decrying Islamists’ human rights violations as done in the war crime trials saga which denied Islamists the right to free, fair trial and the presumption of innocence – while censuring Islamism is made possible through an essentialized Islamist identity that reduces Islamists to an ethnicity, manageable under secular policies of tolerance and diversity within the European Enlightenment project’s notion of progress.

In this regard, Shadi Hamid (2016) opines that Islamists are Islamists for a reason. Without that reason, they no longer would be Islamist. By not acknowledging that it is impossible to be an Islamist without striving for the Islamist political order which is fundamentally different from and incompatible with the secular political order, secularists leave their notion of progress unchallenged (see Iqtidar 2011). As society is bound to progress in accordance with the notion of progress found in the secular-liberal imagination, secular policies are universalized.

When secularist political parties, civil society groups, NGOs, and pressure groups lobby, mobilize, or work for secular agendas, their preferences are portrayed as policies – without adjectives – that need to be implemented regardless
of which party is in power or what political system a country has. Secular policies and agendas are depoliticized and made to appear like neutral concerns that everyone should share irrespective of one’s political ideology. As such, no amount of collusion between secularists and the regime is characterized as collusion because secularists, according to this perspective, are not trying to advance any partisan agenda. Islamist policies, on the other hand, are carefully provincialized, subjecting Islamist demands to public scrutiny and partisan politics.

Hasan (2020) characterizes BAL as a party that supports Islamism based on what he describes as BAL’s anti-Zionist foreign policy, as well as its support for Islamist political parties and conservative seminaries. Even if those observations remain undisputed, the question that confronts us is this: has the BAL not colluded with anti-Islamist forces or backed “liberal” forums? And if it has, why is BAL cooperating with Islamists an indication of BAL being an Islamist party in disguise, but BAL operating in coordination with anti-Islamists/secularists not indicative of BAL’s intrinsic anti-Islamist character? Why is it so easy to notice all instances when BAL has supported what is described as Islamism, but little acknowledged how secular social and political forces have flourished under, worked with, and benefitted from BAL? The answer to these remains, again, in secularism’s banality: secular policies – policies without adjectives – are the normal whereas Islamist policies are Islamist in an intrusive sense. Therefore, the unquestioned adoption of secular policies is marching towards progress – not secularization – while the adoption of even one Islamist policy, however negligible in importance, is painted as Islamization.

Within the context of an authoritarian setup, the latter is also indicative of collusion with the regime for partisan interests. It is under these conditions that claims of some collusion between the authoritarianism and Islam(ism), such as those Lorch (2018), Griffiths and Hasan (2015), Hasan (2020), Hasan and Ruud (2020), and Ruud and Hasan (2021) make, become intelligible and possible. Exemplary is the textbook controversy that is almost always presented as a case study of collusion between the regime and Islamists. The standard secular narrative, which remains the dominant one, is that “the government launched new editions of schoolbooks, which featured more references to religious symbols and from which 17 poems that Islamic conservatives had despised as ‘atheist’ had been removed” (Lorch 2018: 258). However, Raqib notes that these “Islamic conservatives” did not bargain for something new; rather, all they demanded was rejection of the de-Islamization which secularists had achieved in collaboration with the same regime:

[Islamists’] fears were triggered [...] when they noticed through a Facebook post that the government had omitted seventeen poems and stories that narrate the life and contributions of Muslim personalities, or the experiences of Muslim
societies. HI [the Islamist group] argued that the government replaced these poems and stories with many that allegedly recount the experience of Hindu society, or even one that demonizes Islamic texts and practices. (2020: 243–4)

The dominant secular narrative about the “Islamization” of Bangladesh omits the de-Islamization which had preceded that very “Islamization”.

In this milieu, calls for democratization or renouncing authoritarianism are not beyond the secularist-Islamist divide, but are rather the continuation of the exclusionary Kemalist nation-building project responsible for Bangladesh’s authoritarian turn since 2013. Since Islamism is in the secularist gaze to blame for regime’s authoritarian turn, to democratize means to de-Islamize, meaning that Islamists should have no represented interest unless they choose to cease to be Islamists. If democratization must take place not (primarily) because the regime is autocratic but because it has taken an Islamist turn, why should Islamists support the very democratization process which would strip them of power? Since Islamists have been eliminated from the political scene, democratization has now come to mean the actualization of the secularist plan Akash (2015) laid out. If the marketplace of ideas is to remain closed to the Islamist possibility, what tangible good could democratization yield for Islamists?

After De-Islamization: Inventing Islam(ism) and Islamization

Pronouncing “the end of political Islam as we know it,” Abdullah Al-Arian (2020) writes:

Whether it is Ennahda … or the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood … or the range of Islamist parties across the Arab region whose fortunes have similarly oscillated, it has become clear that the traditional mission that defined Islamic activism for much of the past half century is no more.

Al-Arian pays special attention to Tunisia’s Ennahda and Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood to prove his point. He illustrates that Ennahda, under Ghanouchi’s leadership, distanced itself from its Islamist past and rebranded as primarily committed to democracy. Scholarly literature on Ennahda has also taken note of Ennahda’s “exit from political Islam”, in Meddeb’s (2016) words, and entry into secularism (Affan 2016; Ghanouchi 2016; Pfeifer 2019). It appears that al-Arian is right in his assertion that such a radical transformation does amount to the end of political Islam as we know it.

However, the end of political Islam as we know it is not the same as the end of political Islam. After five years passed since Ennahda’s secular turn, Tunisian
InventInG ISlaM (ISM) 175

When the coup took place, the opposition did not hesitate ... to support it, and later blamed it for not going to its harshest and most extreme aspirations: dismantling Ennahda and imprisoning its leaders. This opposition was ready to give up some of the requirements of democracy, in order to get rid of the movement [... and] make Tunisia a democracy without political Islam. (Mabrouk 2022; emphasis mine)

Note the mention of the term political Islam in reference to Ennahda, which officially departed from Islamism half a decade ago. Al-Arian is accurate in his assessment of the end of Islamism as we know it, but Islamism is here to stay, because Islamism will be invented even in its absence to further secularize Muslim societies. Indeed, the recent political crisis in Tunisia is viewed as another secularist-Islamist power struggle (McDowell and Amara 2021). Similarly, in Turkey, the ruling AK Party is routinely accused of being Islamist despite explicitly breaking away with its Islamist past and adopting secular policies and principles (Hamid 2016).

Bangladeshi Islamists, like their Middle Eastern counterparts (Hamid 2014), have also flirted with de-Islamization in the hopes of getting acceptance from social, political, economic, military elites and foreign powers. A case in point is the Jana Akangkhar Bangladesh (JAB) initiative which later transformed into the Amar Bangladesh Party (ABP), a secular-liberal party whose key founders parted ways with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Much before the formation of ABP, Jamaat itself had undergone a series of reformation and transformation to meet the demands of ever-changing modern-secular sensibilities. Its leaders contemplated Ennahda’s formula even before Ennahda produced it. The executed Jamaat leader Kamaruzzaman called for launching a secular political party as early as 2011, shortly after the regime rounded up top Jamaat leadership on war crime charges. However, Bangladeshi secularists view this proposal as an insincere “coping strategy” (Zahid 2015). Likewise, despite ABP critiquing and abandoning Islamism, it is and always will remain perceived as an Islamist party under different garb (see Jektik 2019; Kabir 2020).

That no amount of “moderation” or “secularization” of Islamists or Muslims is enough is a salient feature across Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts, as Irfan Ahmad demonstrates in the Indian context: “while the members of the Jamaat themselves acknowledged the ‘massive’ change, many of its Muslim critics – liberal, leftist, as well as ulema (religious experts) of other sects – told me that the Jamaat had not changed, and, if it had, the change was only tactical” (2009: 1). Reflecting on the transformation of Jamaat, he also notes that, during its
inception, it prohibited members from taking part in secular legislatures, secular judiciary, modern-secular educational institutions, and secular government jobs, while Jamaat in Bangladesh, like in India and Pakistan, now allows all the above (2013). The argument that Pakistani Jamaat’s reversal of its stance on the issues mentioned above reflects the Pak Jamaat’s perception of Pakistan being an Islamic state does not hold, because Bangladeshi Jamaat is doing the same despite Bangladesh not being an Islamic state – with secularism being one of the key principles of its constitution. Effectively, if Pakistan were indeed an Islamic state, Pakistan Jamaat and Islamism in general would have lost their reason for existing there. The other argument is one of pragmatism, which Ahmad (2009, 2013) problematizes by showing that the transformation of Jamaat is not tactical but ideological.

It appears, then, that throughout the Muslimistan, from Tunisia to Bangladesh and beyond, mainstream Islamist movements are failing to challenge the notion of progress enshrined in the European Enlightenment project, thereby reinforcing the claims of the modernization thesis. However, notwithstanding the transformations of (mainstream) Islamist movements across the globe, what Irfan Ahmad calls the “persistence of Islamism thesis” remains the dominant narrative (2009: 2). The persistence of Islamism thesis sees these seismic shifts and transformations of Islamists not as secularization or moderation but instead as a resurgence of Islamism. Inventing Islam(ism) in secularization/de-Islamization, wherein previous episodes of de-Islamization are erased by setting up a new goal for secularization against which the Islamists’ secularity is measured, makes this claim possible. The banality of secularism, along with markedness of Islamism, with their ever-changing meanings, allows for forgetting the existence of secularism despite its pervasive presence and ringing the alarm bell at the first sight of perceived Islamism or a signifier thereof.

Although theoretically Islamists stand to lose in democratizing Bangladesh without accounting for different levels of loss suffered by Islamist and secularist camps, and despite the gradual de-Islamization of Bangladeshi society and politics under secular authoritarianism, “Islamists” may eventually join in the process, which would essentially require their unbecoming Islamist. But the logic of secular politics would characterize would-be ex-Islamists as Islamists, perpetuating the process of de-Islamization by continuing to shift what is signified by “Islamism” until it collapses into “secularism”, a meaning which itself is subject to perpetual shift in accordance with ever-evolving secular sensibilities (see Asad 2003, 2018).

Akash’s (2015) original plan also considers the possibility of Islamists becoming secularized in the face of state-sponsored violence. However, no amount of secularization could satisfy him, as he is open only to considering the possibility of Islamists “pretending to be moderate Islamists”, and not to sincere “moderation” or “secularization”. Asef Bayat’s (1996) much touted post-Islamism thesis ignores
the secular power’s ability to dictate what Islam(ism) is at any moment and place, thereby allowing itself the power to invent Islam(ism) even in its absence. The post-Islamist moment is suspended for eternity since today’s post-Islamism can be – and often is – tomorrow’s Islamism.

Conclusion

The existence of Islamism in Muslimistan in and of itself attests to the fundamental decentering of Islam as the organizing premise of Muslimistan. Within this fundamentally de-Islamized framework, secular power’s ability to perpetually shift the meaning of Islam(ism), and therefore of secularism, allows for de-Islamization *ad infinitum*. Secularism’s banality and universality on the one hand, and Islam(ism)’s provinciality and markedness on the other, make it possible to feel secularism only in its (perceived) absence and Islam(ism) in its (perceived) presence. Since the Kemalist nation-building project necessitates the existence of Islam(ism) as an Other to justify its own being, secular power must invent Islamization amidst one of the most draconian episodes of secularization happening in Bangladesh. The suspension of democracy, calls for democratization, and the explanation of Bangladesh’s authoritarian turn through the alleged failings of Islam(ism) – all are integral to secularist politics. Thus, the primacy of the secularist-Islamist binary remains, reinforced by challengers of its own invention.

References


Jebtik, A. (2019) Jamaater kholos baddal: Bangladeshe Turoshko model [Jamaat Changes Guise: Turkey Model in Bangladesh]. *Bangla Tribune*, 18 February. [Accessed 25 March 2021]. Available from: https://www.banglatribune.com/420682/%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%96%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%88-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%B2-%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B2-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%82%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%94%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%8B%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%95-%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B2


Zahid, S. (2015) Dol Punorgotheron Prostab. Prothom Alo. 7 April 2015. [Accessed 18 June 2022]. Available from: https://www.prothomalo.com/politics/%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BF