

Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia

A Comparative Study of Pakistan and Bangladesh

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Abstract

Islamic fundamentalism is a multifarious movement with diverse manifestations, components, and contextual historical and societal conditions. While the radical Islamists, for instance, seek to impose change from above through holy wars, others pursue a bottom-up approach to bring about the re-Islamisation of the society through extensive networks of social activity. Regardless of their particularistic properties, all Islamist groups, however, share a common goal of establishing an Islamic order (*nizam Islami*) for the actualisation of Muslim life. The fundamentalists may not have registered considerable success in electoral terms, but they continue to dominate political discourse because their message is capable of attracting a broad spectrum of society. On the basis of a broad understanding of Islamic fundamentalism as a religio-political movement, this article attempts a comparative study of the phenomenon in Pakistan and Bangladesh, two leading Muslim states of South Asia. By examining the historical and social context, internal political developments including the role of state in promoting religious agenda and the varying impact of extraneous factors, the article argues that while Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh is containable, accomplishing it in Pakistan will be difficult because of the state appropriation of Islam in political discourse guaranteeing the movement's staying power.

Keywords

Pakistan, Bangladesh, fundamentalists, Islamisation, *Jihadis*, Jamaat-i-Islami, Deobandis, Tablighi Jamaat, Wahhabism, Sheikh Mujib, General Zia-ul-Haq, General Ziaur Rahman

Introduction

In the post-Cold War epoch, one of the most significant phenomena, which has come to the fore, is Islamic fundamentalism. There are several forms of fundamentalism linked to revivalist movements of various religions, yet internationally Islamic fundamentalism is more pronounced and widespread. Broadly defined as a religio-political movement, Islamic fundamentalism is more than simply a rejection

of modernity or a revolt against the West; it seeks to establish an alternative global order. The fundamentalists believe that departure from and non-abidance with Islam since the onset of the nation–state system has led to steady regression and decline of Muslim peoples. They advocate adherence to the original beliefs of the religion in their literal interpretations as fundamental and basic principles, transcending all social, economic, political and cultural transformations which span a period of 14 centuries. Their call for ‘the return to Islam’ has incited political involvement and direct action across the Muslim world to bring about the re-Islamisation of the society and the establishment of an Islamic order in accordance with the fundamentalist doctrinal vision of the world, popularly known as *nizam Islami* (Islamic order) (Kelsay 1993; Tibi 1998).

The term fundamentalism was used for the first time in the 1920s with reference to certain Protestant churches and organisations opposed to ‘modernism’ within Christianity. Fifty years later, the term came to be used for all religious movements that seek to return to ‘fundamentals’ and to any movement seeking power for the purpose of governance according to religious values and principles. The use of fundamentalism in connection with Islam spread rapidly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and comparable Muslim movements elsewhere—so much so that by 1990, the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defined it not only as ‘the strict maintenance of traditional Protestant beliefs’ but also as ‘the strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion, especially Islam’ (*Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1990, 477). By sheer dint of usage, Islamic fundamentalism has become the most cited fundamentalism of all. There is, however, no agreement among scholars with regard to the use of the label of fundamentalist in the Islamic context. While some contend that the term is less descriptive than it is accusatory, others argue that every Muslim believes in the fundamentals of Islam and thus is a fundamentalist in the positive sense of the term (Esposito 1992; Juergensmeyer 1993, 1–2; Norrani 2002).

Given the controversy over the use of the term, it has become conventional in the literature on Muslim societies to distinguish ‘Islamic’ from ‘Islamist’ movements. The former refers to any religion-oriented trend and the latter, the specific Islamic variety of fundamentalism that seeks to increase Islam’s role in society and politics, usually with the goal of an Islamic state (Tibi 1998, 13). In other words, Islamists are those Muslims who draw upon the belief, symbols and language of Islam to inspire, shape and animate political activity. This category also includes the moderate, tolerant, peaceful Islamists who seek to apply their religious values to domestic political problems and foreign policy. While the radical Islamists, also known as extremists, seek to impose change from above through holy wars, many others pursue a bottom–up approach that Gilles Kepel calls ‘Islamisation from below’ (Kepel 1985). Both the moderate as well as radical fundamentalists, however, share a common goal of constructing a totalitarian theocratic state.

Under military and political pressures, Islamic extremism—particularly the *Jihadi* variety—may peter out, but Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism as a movement will not easily succumb to external blows, thanks to the impressive social infrastructure it has. In the past decades, Islamist groups have built up a large, organised social base through independent networks of charitable societies, consumer cooperatives, educational institutions, social welfare and medical services. Drawing on the charismatic leadership and its extensive networks of social activity, Islamism ‘provides political responses to societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on re-appropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition’ (Denoëux 2002, 61). Thus, if Islamism has become the primary vehicle and vocabulary of most political discourse in much of the Muslim world, it is less because of its conspiracy narratives or pursuit of establishing the *Nizam al-Islami* modelled on the Medinian Caliphate than the failure of other protest ideologies, namely, nationalism and socialism, in achieving

their anti-imperialist, nationalist egalitarian goals (Mohapatra 2007, 41). Indeed, Islamist discourse is so pervasive today that even secular nationalists do not hesitate to invoke such Islamic themes as *jihad* and *iman* (belief) in an effort to re-capture the lost ground. Paradoxically, nationalism that began as a sort of de-Islamised religion is now reappearing as an Islamised nationalism or simply Islamism.¹

Islamic fundamentalism is, however, a complex multidimensional phenomenon, which requires a multi-causal explanation.² It is arguably the product of a combination of both endogenous and exogenous factors. The first refers to the symptoms of the society in crisis (gross mal-distribution of political power, culture of corruption, growing unemployment and chaotic urbanisation); the second is related to the developments outside, notably the process of globalisation and Western politico-cultural penetration spawning deep sense of alienation or marginalisation.³ Internally, Islam has been used both as an apology for status quo, and as a regime-challenging ideology. Lacking political legitimacy, the ruling elite in many Muslim countries tends to deploy Islamic symbols and themes either for the purpose of legitimation or to discredit the civilian opponents or divert public attention (Billings and Scott 1994; Dekmejian 1985; Ismail 2001). The state-sponsored Islamisation eventually creates conditions conducive to the surge of Islamic militancy and *jihadi* terrorism, as in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Where the Islamists have failed to capture state power, their focus has shifted to the public life of individual Muslims to bring about the re-Islamisation from below. The process is facilitated by the fact that Islam at the level of masses provides a frame of reference for their collective identity and a symbol of self-assertion rooted in their traditions (Schwedler 2001).

Islamic fundamentalism is not homogeneous since it is not like the communist movement fighting a common global issue. It is a multifarious movement with diverse manifestations, components and contextual, historical and societal conditions. Even the programmes, strategies and tactics of Islamist groups vary among and within countries, as do their sometimes contending ideologies (Faksh 1997). Regardless of their particularistic properties, all Islamist groups, however, share some common denominators as they draw on key assumptions of themes such as the need for liberating mankind from the state of Godless *jahiliyya* and establishment of an Islamic order for the actualization of Muslim life. Whether it is the decrees of fugitive Saudi financier Osama bin Laden or the political agenda of the Pakistani Jamaat-i-Islami and its counterpart in Bangladesh, all point to identical goals and unity of purpose though they differ on strategies and methods.⁴

In the backdrop of a broad understanding of Islamic fundamentalism, this article aims to make a comparative assessment of the phenomenon, which attained a vicious and virulent character in Pakistan and Bangladesh during the past two decades. By examining four key factors—Islam as a source of political legitimacy, role of the state in promoting religious agenda, national identity crisis and the impact of external developments—the article argues that while Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh is containable given its local syncretistic cultural practices and ideological polarisation, accomplishing it in Pakistan will be difficult because of the state appropriation of Islam in political discourse guaranteeing the movement's potency and staying power.

Islam as a Source of Legitimacy

Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh has not only served the instrumental function as the purveyor of legitimacy but also represents the constitutive element of state identity. In Pakistan, for example, religious

right has been a wilful accomplice of the state in reinforcing an instrumentalist use of Islam. It has in varying degrees complimented the military both in its quest of legitimacy and its efforts at marginalising the mainstream parties politically. While the military sees itself as the guardian of the state power and has established the mandate to intervene should the civilian authority fail to deliver, it relies on the Islam-centric pillars of state ideology to retain its political primacy. Likewise, the religious groups have been the self-proclaimed guardians of the Pakistani state, defending the founding ideology of the state against perceived or real attacks on Islam and at the same time championing the vanguard role that Pakistan plays as a leader of the *ummah* (global Muslim community) (Akhtar, Amiralui and Ali Raza 2006). Furthermore, the image of military as the protector of 'Islamic Pakistan' against a 'Hindu India' has turned the Ulema into a natural ally. In any case, the military requires their services to legitimise its engagement in politics and counter the potential civilian opposition (International Crisis Group 2003, 2).

The military–mullah alliance expanded and gained strength during the 11 years of military rule of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988). Zia had, in fact, joined hands with the religious parties prior to overthrowing an elected government. Predictably, the religious conservatives like the Deobandi Ulema and the Jamaat-i-Islami not only guided Zia's brand of Islamisation but also became the military's partners in the Afghan war (Haqqani 2005). It was during the Afghan *jihad* that a definitive mullah–military alliance developed into its present manifestation. Despite the restoration of democracy, the political process in post-Zia period remained hostage to the 'unholy alliance', which undermined the credibility of civilian political actors so much so that General Musharraf carried out the bloodless coup in November 1999 without a whimper of protest (Hussain 2007, 12–27). The chief architect of the Kargil misadventure, Musharraf, continued to utilise the services of the Islamist forces for the consolidation of his hold on power, and more importantly, his policy of persecution and harassment of his secular political adversaries facilitated the steady growth of the Islamist parties (International Crisis Group 2005, 7). The six-party religious–political alliance called the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in fact owed its victory in the October 2002 elections in North-west Frontier Province and Balochistan to state patronage, particularly the blessings of the military-led establishment.

Unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh has experienced no such alliance even though there are instances of convergence of interests between the military and the clergy. What would arguably account for the absence of this feature in Bangladesh is Islam not being the *raison d'être* of the state. All the same, Islam has assumed pre-eminence in the Bangladeshi polity since the introduction of a new national ideology following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib and the overthrow of his government by a military coup in August 1975. Not long after his ascendancy as the new ruler in November 1975, General Ziaur Rahman brought about a major shift in state ideology by replacing the secular 'Bengali nationalism' with 'Bangladeshi nationalism' (Ahmed 2004, 177–317; Khan 1985). Outwardly though inclusive, the new Bangladeshi nationalism essentially highlights the Muslim roots of the country, differentiating its Muslim majority Bengalis from their Hindu counterparts in West Bengal in India. This in a sense 'reinstated the "Two Nation" thesis that the formation of Bangladesh had seemingly overturned. Hindu Bengal was once more recognised as Indian and alien' (Brasted 2005).

On the basis of the new state ideology, Ziaur Rahman created the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to compete for power with the Awami League—the party closely identified with the regime he had overthrown. To counteract the political influence of the Awami League, not only did the Zia regime consciously flirt with Islamic-oriented groups and social movements but also amended the constitution in 1977 by replacing 'socialism' and 'secularism' with 'social justice' and 'the absolute faith in God

Almighty', which transformed Bangladesh into a quasi-Islamic state (Ali 1996). Internally, this transformation enabled President Zia to legitimise his rule while providing the ideological platform to justify his opposition to the Awami League. Externally, the state-led Islamisation brought the oil-rich Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia closer to Bangladesh, whereas the US preferred the pro-Western Islamists to the pro-Soviet socialists in Dhaka.⁵ The Islamisation process started by Zia in some respects grew even stronger under General Ershad (1982–1990). Together with his Islamic gestures to legitimise his rule, namely the 1988 proclamation of Islam as the state religion, declaration of Friday as the weekly holiday, introduction of religious teaching in the military, promotion of *madrassa* education and construction of mosques, Ershad's overplay of the 'India card' over the Farakka barrage issue and attempts at politically re-instating the pro-Pakistani and anti-Liberation elements like Golam Azam and S.A. Rahman helped create a popular support base for the Islamists (Hashmi 2003). As Tazeen Murshid has pointed out, 'Religion and politics do not necessarily come together only when political institutions are weak, but also when dominant authoritarian regimes feel threatened' (Murshid 1995, 370).

The ensuing competition among the two mainstream political parties—the Awami League and the BNP—to publicly display their loyalty to Islam by taking recourse to various pseudo-religious rituals 'demonstrated the importance of the Islamisation of politics spearheaded by the Jamaat, and equally pursued by the successive military regimes of Zia and Ershad' (Rahim 2001, 254). As a result, the Islamist groups on the political margin began to exercise disproportionate influence by taking advantage of the polarised nature of the Bangladeshi polity. Emboldened by the victory of the Afghan *mujahideen* against the Soviet army and the subsequent Taliban rule there, the radical factions within the Islamist movement forged close ties with the Pakistan-backed pan-Islamic *jihadis* and the Al Qaeda network of bin Laden. Apart from the nexus built over the years between the Bangladeshi Islamic militant groups like the Harkatul Jihad al-Islami, the Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI) of Pakistan and the International Islamic Brigade, a steady increase in the share of votes for the Jamaat-i-Islami since the 1991 parliamentary elections and the ongoing conflict between the pro-NGO civil society and anti-NGO Islamists were a definite pointer towards an impending ascendancy of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh.⁶

Impact of External Developments

The rise of the Islamist forces as prominent legitimate political actors in Bangladesh is less due to the impact of changes in global political structure or extraneous organisation and ideology than 'the specific dynamics of domestic politics that allowed the pre-eminence of Islamic forces in the polity, and their successes in the electoral process' (Riaz 2003). In contrast, the external factors, namely, the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, played a major role in facilitating Pakistan's Islamisation process under Zia-ul-Haq. Following the onset of the second Cold War, Washington's pursuit of so-called policy of containment turned Pakistan as its frontline state that would serve as an effective bulwark against both the spread of Soviet influence in South-west Asia as well as the threat of the Iranian-type clerical revolution. In return for wider legitimacy along with economic and military assistance, General Zia accepted this role and opened up Pakistani territory for training camps for the *Jihadis*. Thus, started 'a joint venture' between the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which in the next decade and half turned a local conflict into the pan-Islamic *jihad* to fight the Soviet Union.

Even after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989, Arabs continued to drift to Afghanistan for military training and introduction to a new ideology based on a deadly mixture of Salafism and puritanical Deobandism. A branch of Sunni Hanafi Islam, Deobandis, arose in India during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a reform movement with twin objectives of training religious scholars to safeguard the traditional Islamic values and to resist the colonial state ruled by non-Muslims. What was, however, taught to the Afghan refugees in hundreds of *madrassas* set up along Pakistan's Pashtun belt in the wake of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was an extreme form of Deobandism, which was much closer to the Wahhabi creed than the reformist agenda of the original Deoband seminary (Rahman 1966, 204–205). In fact, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York marked the beginning of a new phase of Islamist terrorism as it moved from the internal arena of Muslim states to a global context, under the banner of a pan-Islamic *jihadi* movement (Mohapatra 2002). The new generation of *jihad* volunteers known as the 'Arab Afghans' became a major security issue in the countries of their origin as many of them formed clandestine guerrilla cells modelled on Afghan lines in the Arab countries, while others had their bases inside Afghanistan to conduct campaigns elsewhere (Bruce 1995).

Role of the State

As noted, the gradual transformation of Pakistan from an Islamic to *jihadi* state is the result of the state appropriation of Islam in political discourse initiated by General Zia-ul-Haq since his seizure of power in July 1977 (Yasmeen 2003). General Zia's search for legitimacy caused him to employ Islam as a source of national identity, cultural integration and public morality to a degree which exceeded the previous regimes. It is, however, argued by some scholars that Zia used Islam not simply for the purpose of regime-legitimacy but to neutralise the rising tide of Islamist activism in the form of the Order of the Prophet (*Nizam-e-Mustafa*) movement of the late-1970s by co-opting sections of Islamist opposition and isolating others and at the same time bolstering state power and capacity. According to S.V.R. Nasr:

Islamistaion from above allowed the state to reap the fruits of the Islamist propaganda and win the competition with the Islamist challenge from below to control the normative order, and thus construct a viable state ideology that provides for uniformity across society as well as a greater compliance with the will of the state. (Nasr 2001, 15)

At any rate, Pakistan under Zia was not simply authoritarian in political structure; it aspired to be an ideological state. Predictably, Zia's Islamisation programme covered all areas and institutions including the army and judiciary. The army's role was no longer confined to merely defending Pakistan's territorial borders; it became the defender of the country's 'ideological frontiers'.⁷ In the Islamisation campaign, Zia set for himself the goal of introducing concrete steps designed to transform the socio-cultural, economic and political principles. In an overarching quest for Islamic transformation of society, General Zia used education as an instrument to 'prepare a new generation wedded to the ideology of Pakistan and Islam' (Richter 1981). His espousal of the orthodox version of Islam and his pursuit of an ideological state left behind an atmosphere of bigotry, fanaticism and distorted values conducive to an upsurge of Islamist extremism; for the primacy of orthodox Islam in Pakistan was not effectively challenged despite

the return to democracy after General Zia's death in August 1988. Islam remained the primary idiom of political discourse and a vehicle for mass mobilisation by both the government and the opposition.

Equally significant was the transformation of the Pakistani army from a secular and professional organisation to one which included elements that strongly subscribed to beliefs and policies of General Zia. Thus, if the democratisation progress was retarded in the succeeding years, one of the leading factors was the de facto alliance between the Islamist factions and the military. It played a catalytic role in both the dismissal of Benazir Bhutto's government in August 1990 as well as in the formation of the Islamic Democratic Alliance (IJI) comprising the two factions of the Pakistan Muslim League and the right-wing religious parties. Consequently, the democratically elected governments were reluctant to undo the Islamisation process partly due to their fear of incurring the wrath of the Islamist groups who could mobilise masses in the name of protecting Islam and partly, due to the uncertainty surrounding their survival in a political system dominated by the military and President whose power had been enhanced by Zia's Eighth Amendment to the 1973 constitution in 1985. It was in fact during the civilian rule that the leader of PPP's political ally, the right-wing Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam-F (JUI-F), Maulana Fazl ur-Rahman played a crucial role in opening up communication channels between the Pakistan government and the Taliban leadership.⁸

A political outfit of the Pakistani Deobandis, the JUI funded by Saudi Wahhabis had set up hundreds of *madrassas* (Islamic schools) along Pakistan's Pashtun belt between the NWFP and Baluchistan during the war in Afghanistan, offering Afghan refugees and young Pakistanis free education, shelter and military training. A predominantly Pashtun group, the Taliban emerged in 1994 as a messianic movement made up of a generation of young Afghans raised in the strictest fundamentalism of the Deobandi *madrassas*.⁹ Actively backed by Pakistani army and the ISI, a band of Taliban conquered Kandahar in late 1994 and set up the so-called emirate there. The Talibanisation process also contributed to the growing political marginalisation of Pashtun nationalist forces. Given their chequered history and traditional support base, they are potentially an effective and viable political force to challenge the religious extremists in the North-west Frontier Province (NWFP) and the adjacent Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Pakistan's secular and Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) was routed in national and provincial elections in 2002 largely. More importantly, Pakistan's Islamist groups are not of the same breed, and most of them have been created and sustained by the state, which may enable the authorities to curb their activities either by force or by pitting one against another because anti-Musharraf and anti-American sentiments were at their peak, leading to support for the religious alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) (Abbas 2007).

Similar to the Pakistani experience, an Islam-oriented state ideology introduced in Bangladesh by General Ziaur Rahman set off a process that conduced to the re-emergence of religious themes and idioms in political discourse. In addition, Zia's brand of nationalism in which Islam was accorded primacy over ethnic/linguistic identity encouraged the previously disbanded religio-political forces to occupy a definite space in the Bangladeshi polity (Riaz 2003, 112). Although the hardcore Islamists failed to take power, their influence on national politics and society at large continued to grow even after the end of 15 years of military rule. Nowhere was it more glaring than in the profoundly secular Awami League, whose ideological position as regards Islam changed dramatically. Apart from making a pilgrimage to Mecca, the party supremo, Sheikh Hasina, tried to convey the message through usage of Islamic jargons, slogans and symbols that the party valued Islam as an integral part of Bangladeshi national culture. So did its rival, the BNP, which sought support of the Islamic parties, notably Jamaat-i-Islami to counter the challenge posed by the secular nationalist forces represented by the Awami League (Karlekar 2005, 23–27).

As in Pakistan, so too in Bangladesh, wooing the religious right as political ally came at a price of promising to advance the cause of Islamisation. Unlike Pakistan, the progress of Islamisation does not seem to have purged Bangladesh of its secular intuitions and syncretic traditions. Reflective of this is the growing popularity of Awami League, which, notwithstanding its public display of pro-Islamic gestures, remains officially committed to secularism and ethno-linguistic nationalism. Whereas the BNP believes in, not necessarily practices, Islamic values, the Awami League considers the relationship between man and God private (Uddin 2006, 171). Even though Islam has been declared as the state religion, the Constitution ‘provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate—subject to law, public order, and morality—the religion of one’s choice. It also states that every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain, and manage its religious institutions’.¹⁰

It may be thus argued that the rise and growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh has more to do with the failure of post-independence leadership to deliver (that is, Mujib’s iron-fisted governance, dilution of democracy and lack of international support) than the failure of secularist experiment per se. Extraneous factors including the inflow of petro-dollars, the super-power rivalry during the Cold War, linkages to the Arab Gulf states and the developments in Afghanistan have only supplemented the process of Islamisation in Bangladesh. After all it is a country of ‘over-developed society (in terms of the level of political consciousness due to mass mobilisation during the liberation movement) with an ‘under-developed state’ (in terms of institution-building), which accounts for the poor governance, gross mismanagement and a polarised polity. Together they have created space for the fundamentalist Islam to grow steadily at the cost of the country’s secular tradition and syncretic culture. In contrast, Pakistan, as Hamza Alavi has described it, is an ‘over-developed state’ (in terms of strong military–bureaucratic control) with an ‘under-developed society’, the reasons for which lay in the problematic process of state formation.

State Formation Process and Islamisation

As noted, the role of Islam varies depending on the nature of the society, structure of the polity and more importantly, their diverse experiences in the historical process of state formation. While Pakistan was created on the basis of religion, Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign, independent entity in defiance of a national identity defined by Islam. What makes Bangladesh distinct from the former are its local syncretistic cultural practices, as reflected in Bengali folk cult, literature, music and festivals. In fact, Bangladeshi nationalism that emerged in the course of the liberation struggle led by Sheikh Mujib’s Awami League was primarily rooted in the unique combination of land and language. Soon after its independence in 1971, Bangladesh adopted this East Bengali nationalism together with socialism, democracy and secularism as state ideology, relegating Islam to the private sphere. Thus, Islamisation in Bangladesh is not an inescapable product of history; nor is it simply a reaction to the failed secularist experimentation during the early days of independence, which, according to a critic, ‘did not reflect Bangladesh’s social spirit and history’ (Hussain 1990; Maniruzzaman 1990). Refuting the proponents of identity crisis theory, Ali Riaz has attributed the rise of Islam as a political ideology in Bangladesh to the ‘crisis of hegemony of the ruling bloc and politics of expediency by the secularist parties’ (Riaz 2003, 302). Together they created an environment conducive to the rise of religious rhetoric in political

discourse and subsequently allowed the Islamist parties to become a significant force in the Bangladesh polity.

As compared to Bangladesh, the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism has attained a virulent character in Pakistan partly because of its geographic proximity to the Muslim world and its enhanced strategic saliency in the wake of the Soviet invasion of bordering Afghanistan. More importantly, the ambiguity surrounding the role of Islam in the affairs of the state left the field open for the adventurist rulers to resort to its absolutist interpretations either to legitimise their misconduct or to cover up their failings. The state-sponsored Islamisation process in Pakistan is in a way organically linked to this basic problem pertaining to the state ideology and its identity. This has its roots in the conflict between the liberal and orthodox Islamic views that reside in the independence struggle for Pakistan. For the former, 'the ideology of Pakistan was not Islam, but rather the belief that Muslims and Hindus were intrinsically too different in culture and beliefs to allow the former to thrive as a minority within a state dominated by the latter' (Whaites 1998). It was Muslim nationalism which became the vehicle for the achievement of Pakistan.

The Pakistani state, having been created in the name of Islam, asked Mawdudi, had an obligation to define what it meant to be Muslim.¹¹ Reflective of the struggle between liberal and orthodox Islam, the first Constitution of 1956 declared Pakistan an Islamic Republic, asserting an Islamic basis for the state but not allowing the Qu'ran and the Sunna as the sole source of guidance and law for the state. The ideological conflict intensified following the traumatic experience of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, which resulted in the secession of East Pakistan as Bangladesh. While Ayub Khan's modernist orientation had already led to a major confrontation with the orthodox Ulema over proposed family law reforms, the 1971 debacle refocused popular attention on the issue of Pakistan's identity and its *raison d'être*. The questions raised were as follows: 'What are the links that bind the people of Pakistan? What is the soul and personality of Pakistan? What is our national identity and our peculiar oneness which makes us a nation apart from other nations?' (Richter 1979).

Islamic parties attributed the dismemberment of the country to its deviation from the true path of Islam and called for the reaffirmation of Pakistan's Islamic roots (Ziring 1977). It was in the backdrop of powerful Islamic currents that Pakistan's first democratically elected Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977), resorted to Islamic symbolism in domestic and foreign policy despite his secular convictions in order to gain popularity and undercut his political opponents. Even though he increasingly relied on Islam to legitimise his populist experiment based on the ideology of what he called 'Islamic socialism', he failed to resolve the basic issues pertaining to the relationship of religion to the institutions of the state. Consequently, the established religious groups of Pakistan, namely, the Jamaat-i-Islami and Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam, became highly vocal criticising his authoritarian style of governance and campaigning for the establishment of *Nizam-e-Mustafa* (a system of government based on the traditions of Prophet Muhammad) in the country. They spearheaded the 1977 protests against the alleged ballot-rigging under the banner of the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), which gave General Zia-ul-Haq the pretext to overthrow the elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a bloodless July 1977 coup.

Predictably, Pakistan's oldest and most organised fundamentalist organisation, the Jamaat-i-Islami became Zia's surrogate political party internally and the closest ally in the US-sponsored *jihad* in Afghanistan. So central was the importance of the Jamaat to Zia's military regime that Bhutto during his trial in the court once said, 'I chose a Chief of Staff from the Jamaat-i-Islami and the result is before all of us' (Nasr 1994, 172). The process was paralleled by a perceptible shift in the societal attitudes towards Islam partly because of the loss of East Pakistan and in greater part, popular disillusionment with Ayub

Khan's capitalist model of development and Bhutto's brand of socialism.¹² In addition, other factors that contributed in varying degrees towards the aforesaid shift include Pakistan's close proximity to the Muslim countries; the rise of a new middle class as a result of the developmental policies of the earlier decades; expansion of urban proportion of population, which more than doubled from 1950 to 1970; and massive flows of workers including Pakistan's best and brightest to the Gulf countries following the oil boom, undermining the country's labour movement (Yasmeen 1999). All this provided the fertile ground for the orthodox Ulema to bring Islam to the centre stage of the country's politics, setting the stage for the initiation of Islamisation as a state ideology under the military rule of Zia-ul-Haq to strengthen the unity of the nation. In short, Islamisation under Zia was the culmination of the gradual turn of the Pakistani state towards Islam since the early-1970s.

As noted, the gradual turn to Islam began at a time of profound crisis of identity due to the failure of the Western-educated elite-led project of Pakistani nation-building. The failure is partly attributed to the ambiguity surrounding the notion of common Muslim identity, which created ideological polarisation undermining its integrative potential. Second, Pakistani nationalism, unlike its Bangladesh counterpart, did not emerge from below as a popular mass movement for a separate state. It was instead the product of a movement led by 'a coalition of individuals, factions and segmented political interests belonging mostly to the landlord stratum' (Ali 2002). Conceived and campaigned by a small number of Western-educated and secular elites from the central provinces of India, Pakistani nationalism failed to strike roots and help build an overarching national identity amidst various ethnic, sectarian, linguistic and regional diversities. In contrast, the beginning years of independent Bangladesh were marked by secular nationalism, the eclipse of which is attributed to the erosion of the credibility of the Mujibism (the four core state principles of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism) amidst hyperinflation, endemic corruption and non-availability of essentials. The failure of the welfare state naturally prompted Mujib's dictator-successors to resort to Islamic gestures to counteract the political influence of the secular-nationalists represented by the Aawmi League and to rally support among the Muslim peasants.¹³

In short, the 'Hindu phobia' of Bengali Muslims, a legacy since the British colonial days, transforming into 'Indophobia' during the Pakistani period remains embedded in the psyche of the average Bengali Muslims. Arguably, the two factors—Indophobia and a peasants' Islam—have played a crucial role in facilitating the Islamisation process in Bangladesh from below. No less important is the activities of the Tabligh Jamaat, a grass-roots-based puritan movement that had originated in northern India in the late 1920s to preserve and spread an Islamic identity unadulterated by the majority Hindu customs and practices. Although Tabligh Jamaat has no overt political agenda and focuses primarily on observant practices of Islam, it has indirectly contributed to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh through its activities such as the spread of a culture identified with the Islam of the Prophet's period and organising large gatherings of Muslims in Tungi every year.¹⁴

Capping them all is the spread of the Wahhabi school of thought through thousands of Islamic seminaries (*madrassas*),¹⁵ which together with the culture of *fatwas* and the delivery of Islamic justice by the rural Ulema through traditional local institutions like *salish* (village arbitration) have underpinned the fundamentalist challenge in Bangladesh (Riaz 2005). Deprived of their power and status because of the extensive socio-economic programmes of NGOs, particularly those related to rural development, micro-credit and small business, they have allied themselves with the Islamists to prevent the NGO activities.¹⁶ This explains why there was an upsurge in the issuance of *fatwas* in the early-1990s by rural clerics against NGO activists, social reformers and feminists.¹⁷ At the same time, there is an exponential growth

of *madrassas* in Bangladesh, which according to some estimates, have gone up to nearly 64,000 and most of them are beyond any form of government control or supervision. It is estimated that there are as many as 10,000 Qami or Deobandi *madrassas* imparting Islamic education to 100,000 students (the daily *Prothom Alo*, Dakha, 3 April 2006). Independently run and supported by religious endowments and private donations, some of these *madrassas* have been providing their students guerrilla training to realise their dream of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh (*The Daily Star*, 26 February 2005).

A comparative study of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan and Bangladesh has brought to the fore the identity of views Islamists in Pakistan and Bangladesh have on issues ranging from the application of *Sharia*, adultery, status of women and the treatment of religious minorities to a projection of India's enemy image, notwithstanding their cultural–linguistic differences and their diverse experiences in the process of state formation. The fundamentalists may not have registered considerable success in electoral terms, but they continue to dominate political discourse because their message is capable of attracting a broad spectrum of society. 'The perception of Islam as a comprehensive code for all aspects of life, and its intimate connection with both personal and national identity, grant Islamic solution an authenticity no other ideology could have' (Hoffman 2004). Given the anxiety evoked by the problems of modern urban society, as long as Muslim fundamentalists are not allowed to test their solutions by actual application, it is unlikely that these movements will die out. State suppression alone cannot contain the spread of such movements partly because of its ideological legitimacy and partly, religious gatherings or for that matter the mosque prayers cannot be outlawed. Participation in the political process can do more to tame the Islamist threat than state repression. Exclusion and crackdown on the Islamists, as the similar experience of Egypt and Algeria during the 1990s has shown, may radicalise them further with a widespread sympathy among those who would not otherwise be drawn to fundamentalism.

Notes

1. See Majid (2000, 38). Oliver Roy has, however, described the current upsurge of fundamentalist movements in the Muslim world as 'a second order reaction' while arguing that they are not so much a revolt against the failures of modernisation, but an intense reaction to the failures on the part of the religious as well as political leaders to deal with these failures. He has, thus, called the contemporary fundamentalist leaders as 'neo-fundamentalists', who in contrast to the earlier generation of leaders are more populist activists than religious scholars. See Roy (1994, 73–77).
2. Explanations by various scholars are based on two main approaches: cultural essentialist with its focus on Islamic exceptionalism, and contingencist highlighting the 'contingent' realities (socio-economic-political conditions) that exist in each Islamic country. See Butterworth (1992), Halliday (1997), Kramer (2003), Lawrence (1998), Lewis (2002).
3. The process of globalisation, for instance, carries implicit homogenisation tendencies and messages, which in combination with the 'borderlessness' of the phenomenon evokes a cultural pluralist response. Although the scenario of a single 'MacDonaldised' world cultures is an exaggeration, the spread of Western values, beliefs and tastes on a global scale has instigated a defensive counter-movement seeking to shield society from its negative effects. See Barber (1996), Lawrence (1998, 132–139).
4. See Ayooob (2004).
5. Both Zia and Ershad sought the financial support of oil-rich Arab countries and thereby playing into the hands of the Islamist parties like the *Jamaat* Front and the *Jatiya* Party. See Rahim (2001, 248).
6. For an account of the tensions between the secular-liberal forces and the Islamists in Bangladesh, see Murshid (1998).

7. General Zia is quoted in Hoodbhoy and Nayyar (1985, 166).
8. See Jalal (1995, 108–112).
9. See Rashid (1999).
10. Quoted in RDS-IND (2006, 65).
11. For Maulana Mawdudi's views on the ideological basis of Pakistan, see Nasr (1996, 49–68).
12. See Monshipouri and Samuel (1995); on the economic development under Ayub Khan, see Noman (1988, 27–38).
13. On 'peasant Islam' as a factor responsible for the Islamist upsurge in Bangladesh, see Hashmi (2004).
14. For details, see Bertocci (2002), Metcalf (1994).
15. See Baldwin (2002), Linter (2002).
16. For a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon, see Seabrook (2001, 28–30).
17. See Shehabuddin (2002).

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