

## ISLAM AS A SYMBOL OF LEGITIMIZATION: THE ISLAMIZATION PROJECT OF PRESIDENT GENERAL ERSHAD IN BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to look at General Ershad's Islamization policy during his nine years rule. This article tried to examine Ershad's rhetoric to Islam, Islamic values and incorporation of Islam as a state religion in Bangladesh. The data collected from newspapers, books, magazines and journals. The study found that Ershad who raised the 'Islamic slogan' throughout his nine-years rule, although incorporated some Islamic values in state's social and political arena, yet the main objective of that was to legitimize his rule by getting support from the masses as well as Islam-based political parties, but failed.*

**Keywords:** Ershad, Islamization, legitimacy, Islamic slogan, Bangladesh

### INTRODUCTION

General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who came to power through bloodless military coup, ruled the country from 1982 to 1990. The contention is that even though General Ershad frequently talked about the "inevitability" of Islam in the state, he was not actually interested to implement Islamic ideology. His main objective was rather to gain support from the 'Islam loving' people as well as the Islam based political parties. This article argues that Ershad's rhetoric to Islam, Islamic values and incorporation of Islam as a state religion in Bangladesh was a political game, since there were no significant steps taken on the above declaration.

On November 28, 1981, General Ershad issued a lengthy statement assuring that he had no personal ambition to gain power and that he wanted to remain as a soldier. But within a short period of time, however, Ershad had come to power through a bloodless coup.

Ershad justified his actions in terms reminiscent of many a military coups. He said the security of the country was threatened by social and political indiscipline, unprecedented corruption, a devastated economy, an administrative stalemate, extreme deterioration of law and order, and a frightening food crisis. He claimed that the new administration would introduce "a unique form of democracy which no martial-law administrator anywhere in the world have been able to do."<sup>1</sup> He had neither the charisma nor the image like Zia. But like Zia, he also thought Islam would legitimize his assumption of power. Ershad also declared that "Justice Sattar had lost sight of Islamic Nationalistic goals previously set by Ziaur Rahman."<sup>2</sup> Since capturing power in December 1983, Ershad had repeatedly expressed his desire to give prominence to Islam. He proclaimed that no law would be passed which was contrary to the Quran and Sunnah.<sup>3</sup> Besides, he insisted on his determination to rid the country of corruption,

<sup>1</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 April, 1982

<sup>2</sup> Zillur R. Khan, "Islam and Bengali Nationalism," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, No. 8, (August 1989) p. 850

<sup>3</sup> H.M. Ershad, Speech in Lalbag Shahi Mosque, Dhaka, June 10, 1988, in Bodruddin Ahmad, *Generals of Pakistan and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., (1993), p. 156

to establish the dignity of labor, to maintain austerity and "our own distinctive way of life and culture based on nationalism."<sup>4</sup>

### PATRONIZATION OF ISLAM

Ershad took several steps towards Islamization. The new educational policy announced by Ershad government made Arabic a compulsory subject in elementary classes. He introduced the Arabic language and Islamic studies into the school curriculum. According to a policy statement this had been done keeping religious and cultural aspects of the life of people as well as the international needs of Bangladesh in view.<sup>5</sup> An Islamic University was built at Tongi, Dhaka wherein the students were required to be competent in Islamic studies. But later on, Ershad moved the University to a remote place in Bangladesh without heeding the protests of Islamic parties' and people. Ershad also took various other steps towards so-called Islamization. He started to patronize *pirs* (so called Holy Men) and imam of mosques.

He frequently visited various shrines and mosques as well as made liberal grants to these institutions for repairs, reconstruction and beautification; he even went to the extent of exempting mosques from paying electricity and water bills. He chose to address the *Juma* prayers (Friday prayers) and invited people to follow the true path of Islam. Besides this, he joined congregational prayers in mosques and spent more time meeting with people in the streets than in actually running the government. General Ershad even started to put on the cap (wear during prayer times) and went on weekly helicopter trips to *Atrashi*<sup>6</sup> in the district of Faridpur, which set in fashion a new wave of religiosity. He is said to have acquired a spiritual mentor in the *Pir Saheb* (religious divine) resident there, who, on his part, claimed the President of Bangladesh was his disciple and his son. About fifty key army officers, including the army chief of the General staff, the commander of the strategically important 9<sup>th</sup> Division, the DPI chief and several other divisional and brigade commanders along with 20,000 troops also became disciples of the *pir*.<sup>7</sup>

The Ershad regime also turned the *Shahid dibbash* (martyrs day) on February 21 into a religious occasion, and held *Quran khani* (recitations from the Holy Quran) at Shahid Minar for martyrs of the Language Movement. He criticized the tradition of *Alpana* (a 'Bengali way' of decorating floors) and denounced it as being against Islamic culture. However, the 'progressive' (particularly secular) forces seriously opposed it. Traditionally, though the head of State did place wreaths at the Shaheed Minar, there was no provision for *Quran Khani*. Some scholars saw in the above steps as symbolical of the alliance between Ershad and the 'collaborators' (Islamic forces who opposed the independence movement in 1971 by collaborating with Pakistan), But in reality it was not an alliance of Islamic forces, since the major Islamic forces did not support him at all, since the most influential Islamic party the Jam'mat-e-Islami Bangladesh (BJI) launched anti-Ershad movement along with other main political parties since Ershad shown to power. Besides, Maulana Mohammadullah (*Hafizee Huzur*), a popular Islamic leader in early 1980s and the chief of the *Khelafat* movement<sup>8</sup>, issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) in February 1984 condemning Ershad's government as un-

<sup>4</sup>Badruddin Ahmad, *The Generals of Pakistan and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1993), p. 118

<sup>5</sup> Hassan Shariar, *Indian Express*, January 4, 1983, in Chandika L. Gulati, *Bangladesh: Liberation to Fundamentalism* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1988), p. 83

<sup>6</sup> During the Ershad period the *Atroshi pir* (a holy man used to live in Atroshi) was so famous that a large number of ministers and VIPs used to visit him frequently in order to get his 'mercy'.

<sup>7</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 April 1983,

<sup>8</sup> A madrassa based political party.

Islamic, as it did not rule according to Quran and Sunnah, and as illegitimate for seizing power without the consent of the people.<sup>9</sup>

Other strategies of obtaining the support of Islam-loving people included the establishment of a 'Zakat fund' in order to distribute money to the needy headed by the President. Ershad also attended several *Ijtimas* or annual gatherings of the Tablig Jamaat, at Tongi, near Dhaka, where about one million Muslims, including some foreigners, come and gather every year for mass prayer. The regime also established a separate directorate under the Ministry of Education for *madrassa* (religious school) education. One remarkable feature of this fast step was the large-scale expansion and development of religious institutions both in quantity and quality. In 1975-76, there were 1,830 *madrassas* in Bangladesh, which in 1988 increased to 2,700.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the National Commission of Education (1988) set up by the government recommended that religious education should be extended up to class ten so as to make the students more religiously-minded.

Ershad's foreign policy, like Zia's was inclined to the USA, China and the Middle East, while being antagonistic to India and the Soviet Union in general, since Awami League (AL)<sup>11</sup>'s secularism was associated with the Indian political system at a time when secular India was blamed for many problems during the AL's rule. Ershad sought to consolidate Bangladesh's relationships with Islamic countries, this being reflected in Dhaka's holding of the Fourth Islamic Foreign Ministers' Conference in Dhaka 1983. Bangladesh's relations with Muslim countries coupled with the 'Islamization' project naturally affected relation with India.<sup>12</sup> In asserting his regime's stance, Ershad emphatically stated that Bangladesh would settle all her problems with neighbors on the basis of sovereign equality and that despite being a small state it would not compromise national needs.

### ISLAM AS A STATE RELIGION

The most important contribution of the Ershad regime towards the Islamic sentiment was the declaration of Islam as the State religion of Bangladesh in June 1988. The amendment stated that, "the religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic."<sup>13</sup> Ershad said it is to provide a 'religious identity to the nation'. He argued that since 90% of people in the country were guided by Islam from birth to death, Islam should be accepted as the state religion of the country. He also stressed that his motive was to establish the tenets of Islam in accordance with ideals of Prophet Mohammed, where non-Muslim would enjoy full freedom to practice their faiths.<sup>14</sup> Commenting on the above amendment as a historic event, the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Moudud Ahmad,

<sup>9</sup>Kalim Siddiqui (ed.) *Issues in The Islamic Movement (1985-84)* (London 1985), p. 193-94 " Emaduddin Ahmad, "Islam in Bangladesh: Revivalism Or Power Politics," p. 798

<sup>10</sup> Emaduddin Ahmad, "Islam in Bangladesh: Revivalism or Power Politics," p. 798.

<sup>11</sup> The party who led the independence movement in 1971 and one of the main two political parties in Bangladesh.

<sup>12</sup> Chandrika J. Gulati, *Bangladesh: Liberation to Fundamentalism*, p. 84

<sup>13</sup> S. R. Chakrabarty, *Bangladesh Under Mujib, Zia and Ershad: Dilemma of New Nation* (New Delhi: Har-Anad Publication, 1995), p. 180

<sup>14</sup> Tajul Islam Hashmi, "Islam in Bangladesh Politics," in Hussain Mutalib and Tajul Islam Hashmi, *Islam, Muslims and the Modern State: Case-studies of Muslims in Thirteen Countries* (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1994), p.115

<sup>14</sup> S. M. Shamsul Alain, "The Military and the Crises of Politics Hegemony in Bangladesh," *South Asian Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (fall 1990), p. 39

<sup>14</sup> *The Daily Sangram* (Bengali Daily), Dhaka 13 June, 1988

<sup>14</sup> Chandrika J. Gulati, *Bangladesh: Liberation to Fundamentalism*, p. 232

<sup>14</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 1988

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

declared that it recognized Bangladeshi nationalism and Islamic values which formed a natural culmination of the aspirations of the majority of the Muslims of the country.

The attempt at the Islamization process was opposed by all the political parties, even the Islam based political parties which argued that the amendment does not go far enough in setting up a truly Islamic state and interpreted the government's move as diverting the Jama'at-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB) attempt to establish a truly Islamic social system. The then JIB acting Chief, Abbas Ali Khan, held that the people wanted an Islamic State, not a mere declaration of Islam as a state religion. Kazi Abdul Qader, the chief of a fraction of Muslim League in that time, demanded the declaration of Bangladesh as an Islamic Republic. He also saw the government's move as one aimed at suppressing the movement that really seeks to establish the principles of Quran and Sunnah in the state. The Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon (Movement) also expressed a similar view. Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the AL and daughter of late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman condemned "the bill as a big hoax that hit at the very root of the spirit of liberation and one that would nurture communal forces." On the other hand, Khaleda Zia, the widow of late Ziaur Rahman and the chairperson of BNP, who had similar perceptions on Islam to those of Zia, referred to the bill as useless in a predominantly Muslim country and one that was politically motivated. The Ershad regime indeed expressed that the government's intention in declaring Islam as the state religion was to deprive the fundamentalist political parties from using Islam for political purposes. There were no specific measures for the realization of the state religion. Besides, after the declaration Bangladesh's foreign secretary in India had to issue a hurried statement to the effect that "making Islam the state religion does not mean that Bangladesh would be declared an Islamic Republic."

### CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ERSHAD'S ISLAMIZATION

Since the coup d'état of March 1982, all of the major political parties have been demanding for the resignation of Ershad and the holding of free and fair elections under a politically neutral caretaker government and the restoration of civilian supremacy in politics. Ershad, however, managed to pursue the Awami League and JIB to take part in parliamentary elections held on May 7, 1986 in which the government party "won" an absolute majority. According to reliable accounts, these elections were 'rigged', even the Awami League leaders describing them as 'ballot robbery.' Ershad declared the presidential election of October 1986 but this was boycotted by all main opposition parties. The foreign press reported that only two to three percent of the electorate voted in the October 1986 election. As a result, Ershad, perhaps, 'lacking electoral legitimacy, has been trying to gain popularity by resorting to the use of Islamic slogans.'<sup>15</sup> Lucian Pye pointed out that,

When the national leaders do not have an easy command of power, and there is not an automatic and complete acceptance of authority of governmental institutions, they face the legitimacy crisis and one of the means of legitimizing the regime is to place emphasis on values attached to the sentiment of common people.<sup>16</sup>

At the outset of his assumption of power, Ershad was rejected by all main political parties as well as the masses. Therefore, he thought that "Islamic slogans" might be the easiest way to gain the support of the masses, or if not, at least the Islam-based political parties. According to Maniruzzaman, General Ershad's frequent and empathic Islamic proclamation seems to be

<sup>15</sup>Talukdar Maniruzzaman, *Politics and Security of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1994), p. 84.

<sup>16</sup>Leonard Binder and others, (eds.) *Al. Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 147.

affected by the "collaborations" between the Military regime and the Jama'at-e-Islami Pakistan (JIP) following the Ziaul Haque model in Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> JIP welcomed General Zia's martial law regime coming to power in Pakistan in September 1977.

The JIP joined the martial law government in August 1978, with four cabinet ministers, but within one year all of them resigned from the government in disagreement with the indefinite postponement of general elections which were originally scheduled for November 1977. From 1979 to 1984, the JIP remained in uneasy opposition to the politics of the martial law administration of Pakistan.

**Table 1. Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh, 1986**

| <i>Name of the Political Party</i>              | <i>No of Seats won</i> |
|---|------------------------|
| Jatiya Party                                    | 153                    |
| Bangladesh Awami League                         | 76                     |
| Jama'at-e-Islami Bangladesh                     | 10                     |
| Bangladesh Communist Party                      | 5                      |
| National Awami Party (NAP-United)               | 5                      |
| Bangladesh Muslim League                        | 4                      |
| Jaiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Rob)                | 4                      |
| Jaiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Siraj)              | 3                      |
| Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) | 3                      |
| Bangladesh Workers' Party                       | 3                      |
| National Awami Party (NAP-Muzaffar)             | 2                      |
| Independent                                     | 32                     |

Source: Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, *Bangladesh: Crises of Political Development* (Dhaka: Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, 1988), p. 150

In Bangladesh General Ershad might have been influenced by the "Military-Islamic party" collaboration in Pakistan, but by the time Ershad came to power, the marriage in Pakistan between Zia and JIP had already come to an end. In Bangladesh during the era of Ziaur Rahman (1976-80) JIB was the close ally of the Ziaur Rahman regime. This might be one of the reasons why JIB did not seriously oppose the regime of Ziaur Rahman but had its workers worked zealously for the success of BNP in the presidential election of 1978, the parliamentary elections held in 1979 and again in the presidential election of 1981.

JIB joined and actively participated in the popular anti-Ershad movement with two other political movements led by Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) Chief Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of late Sheikh Mujib and the other Khaleda Zia widow of Ziaur Rahman and the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p. 30

Chief of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). They demanded that Ershad withdraw martial law, step down and let a neutral caretaker government preside over the elections, since it was apparent that elections held under the umbrella of martial law can be used to predetermine a given result. JIB and the other political parties even opposed the Eighth Amendment of the constitution that declared Islam is the state religion. The frustrations of Ershad against JIB were expressed openly and he renewed harassment against the JIB soon since then forty leaders and workers of JIB have been assassinated.<sup>18</sup> With reference to the JIB, Ershad said that JIB's politics was 'suffering from utter contradiction.' He observed that 'while they want to portray themselves as the champions of Islam, they have joined hands with those who preach secularism.' On 12 November 1988, President Ershad, addressing a meeting of freedom fighters (who fought for independence in 1971), expressed his determination to "eliminate" the JIB:

Those who opposed the liberation war in 1971 and killed the freedom fighters have now joined politics with their heads high", he said, "Will you remain silent? Will you sit idle? It is high time these enemies of liberation are eliminated. They have no place in this country."<sup>19</sup>

Within a couple of weeks of this open call to violence against the JIB, two of its student leaders and two district level leaders of JIB were assassinated.<sup>20</sup> In 1988, Ershad decided to shift the Islamic University from Gazipur to Kustia. As a result, JIB became more aggressive against Ershad. Maulana Delwar Hussain Saidi, the pro JIB (later on he joined JIB) popular religious leader challenged Ershad in front of a mammoth crowd at the Chittagang Parade Ground in early 1989:

General Ershad you should never forget that yours is an illegitimate government. Do not you ever try to shift the University from Dhaka to Kustia. If you do so, there will be divine retribution (*ghazab*) on you... You cannot forestall Islamic resurgence in Bangladesh by declaring Islam as the State religion.<sup>21</sup>

General Ershad, who had raised the 'Islamic slogan' throughout his nine-year rule, failed to get support from the masses as well as Islam-based political parties. A few reasons may have to explain this failure: First of all, Ershad, who was appointed as the chief of army staff by Ziaur Rahman, had forced Justice Abdus Satter, the elected President, to hand power over to him. The vast majority of the people of Bangladesh were against the way in which power had been seized. It was a military coup against a civilian, elected and popular government. The BNP was supported by all forces opposed to the BAL. When Mustaque and Zia took power, there was widespread belief that condition under Mujib had been so bad and the November 1975 coups so violent, that there was a need for change. But no such feeling accompanied the take-over by Ershad. He was seen as a power hungry general, who lacked the skills that Zia had developed. Ershad furthermore, having come to power, openly directed his attacks on the BNP. Many of the cabinet members of BNP were imprisoned under corruption charges. Later on, however, a couple of BNP ministers convicted for corruption moved from their jail cell into the cabinet of President Ershad.

Secondly, in the case of JIB and other Islamic forces, there were, perhaps, three reasons not to support Ershad. 1) Unlike Ziaul Haque in Pakistan, perhaps he was not considered one of the *saleheen* (pious Muslim). 2) Ershad, who had from the beginning declared "Jihad against

<sup>18</sup> *The Message international*, (Dhaka) January-March, 1989, p.4

<sup>19</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 13 November 1988, p. I

<sup>20</sup> *The Message International*, January-March 1989, p.5

<sup>21</sup> Saidi's speech, Video Tape no. 1 (1989) cited in Tajul Islam Hashmi, "Islam in Bangladesh Politics, p.118.

corruption", was seen by the people to stand at the apex of all corruption. After his removal from the power in 1990, over forty charges of corruption against him were being investigated by a Special Inquiry Committee set up with a view to identifying cases where he could be brought to trial.<sup>22</sup> The temporary downturn in the economy was manifested in an unscheduled run on the foreign exchange reserves, which fell dramatically from a high of US \$ 962 million in July 1989 to US \$ 585 million in July 1990;<sup>23</sup> 3) The Zia-JIP alliance in Pakistan did not bring about positive result as expected by JIP. JIP considered Zia's acts in office a betrayal of its trust. 4) After incorporation of Islam as a State religion there were no significant steps taken on the above declaration.

## CONCLUSION

However, the post-1975 regimes of both Zia and Ershad were mainly interested in fighting against secularism, socialism and the Indo-Soviet influence in foreign policy. The significant contributions of Zia towards the multi-party system, democracy, de-secularization and some cases pro-Islamic policy demands consideration from all quarters. On the other hand, General Ershad tried to follow in the footsteps of Zia. Such as before launching the BNP, Zia had initiated his program for "politics of production" in the form of 19 Points on "Bangladeshi Nationalism", which the BNP quickly adopted as its own philosophy and program. In addition Zia in the beginning named his Party as Jagodal and later on changed to Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP). General Ershad similarly initiated a program of "*Natun Bangla*" (new Bengal) in the form of 21 points, and named his party Name Janadol and later on renamed to Jatiya Party (JP). Both of them, however, had promised not to mix politics with official backing.

Maniruzzaman called Generals Zia and Ershad as "Islamic Modernists" quite different from "Islamic fundamentalists." The "Islamic Modernist," to whom Hashmi coined "Anglo-Mohammedan," is the westernized Muslim aiming at synthesizing Islamic and non-western western values for temporal benefits. They are sometimes with the nationalists at other times with the orthodox *ulama*, *pirs* and *Sufis*, but not with Islamic political parties. They are mainly opportunists and represent Islam in an overly liberal and accommodative manner to the masses, unrealistically and narrowly. Even though, generally this group sympathizes towards Islam but they generally use Islam as a means to further their political interest. Whenever Islam becomes not suitable for the moment, they merely abandon it. For example, after the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution that made Islam as the state religion, Ershad observed that almost all the main political parties- secular, liberal, Islamist traditional *ulama* etc.- criticized the move. Accordingly, he said that the above declaration was not to establish Islamic State but to stop 'fundamentalists' from coming to power. It is perhaps to get sympathy from the secular forces, which has been influential among the intellectuals and media. It seems, however, that the 'Anglo-Mohamemans' who represents 'Muslim Nationalism' in Bangladesh are still popular among the masses.

<sup>22</sup>Rehman Sobhan, *Bangladesh Problems of Governance* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983), p. 14

<sup>23</sup>World Bank, *Bangladesh: Managing Public Resources for Higher Growth*, April 1991, Washington D C.

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