



Artists of Bangladesh Charushilpi Sangsad (BCS) created this portrait and installed it at Milan Chattar, TSC intersection on the eve of the 43rd National Mourning Day.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

It is difficult to encapsulate in words the full spectrum of emotions that are inspired by the ushering in of Victory Day every year—unfathomable joy at the liberation of our country and the final blow to the shackles of Pakistani tyranny; immense pride in the valiance of our freedom fighters and all those who contributed to the independence movement and gave hope to the people of Bangladesh; respect for the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who led us in this untiring struggle, and all our national leaders who laid the foundations of an independent nation; and sorrow for the lives that were needlessly sacrificed and the suffering that was endured, so that we could live in a liberated Bangladesh.

This year's Victory Day is all the more special because it falls in Mujib Borsho, the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, and is also our final stepping stone into 2021, the 50th year of independent Bangladesh. Now more than ever, we find ourselves looking back at how this great leader gave us the strength and courage to fight our oppressors and achieve independence. However, his role in the shaping of Bangladesh did not end there—the foundations of Bangladesh were laid out by Bangabandhu in the form of the Constitution. On October 12, 1972, when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took the floor at the Constituent Assembly, he famously said, "A state without a Constitution is like a boat without an oarsman," and laid out the founding principles that delineated both the rights and the duties of the citizens of this newly independent state—nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism.

In this Victory Day supplement, we focus on discussions of these founding principles and their current state, all the while remembering the oarsmen who brought us this far and gave us the great gift of becoming citizens of an independent nation. It is our hope that the younger generations will be guided by these founding principles in their efforts to build a liberal, tolerant and democratic Bangladesh.

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# Secularism in Bangladesh: The troubled biography of a constitutional pillar

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The ubiquity of the word "secularism" (it is mentioned in more than 75 of the world's constitutions as an ideal the State promotes, or an organising principle that it affirms), and the passionate discussions it generates throughout the world, sometimes distracts us from the fact that its origins are relatively recent.

It was only after the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries; after the bloody inter-denominational conflicts in Europe, or the clashes between ecclesiastical and temporal authorities, which eventually led to the sovereignty of the State (occurring between the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the Congress of Vienna in 1815); after Jefferson's famous "wall of separation between Church and State", and Voltaire's "privatisation of religion" found a welcoming environment in the American and French revolutions in the late 18th century, did the idea of secularism become well entrenched in European literary and political consciousness. The English writer George Holyoake was the first to use it in a systematic manner only in 1851. It was during the French Third Republic (1870-1940) that it was declared to be the "defining ideology of the State".

Not only is it a relatively new concept, it was also delimited by geography. It was essentially a European phenomenon, both in terms of the intellectual tradition that generated it, and the military conflicts that necessitated it. Hence for the rest of the world, which did not share that reality, it was a foreign concept where its relevance was dimly understood, its meaning fuzzy, its embrace clumsy.

It may be argued that the idea of "democracy" is similarly alien. But democracy was easier to explain, it animated the anti-colonial struggles, and it was reflected in some concrete practices and institutions that were identifiable and populist. Secularism was not. But, more importantly, while democracy did not challenge deeply held commitments and values, secularism problematised the core of their belief systems, and sometimes even their identity. It should be pointed out, as Karen Armstrong has done, that the notion of "religion" understood in the West, is subtly but substantially different from what the Arabic word "*deen*" or the South Asian word "*dharma*" connotes.

It was expected that the road to secularism would be rocky in South Asia, perhaps more so in Bangladesh. There were pre-existing tensions between Hindus and Muslims (mitigated to some extent by Sufi teachings, some syncretistic cultural practices, and the moral economy of the peasantry) which were aggravated by the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 that conflated class and religion and sharpened earlier divisions. There were the machinations, and sometimes the confusions, of the British. There was the emergence of a middle class in both communities (a little later, and weaker, for the Muslims) which led to a competition for political power and economic favour from the British, and provoked the self-conscious exploitation

of religion, the creation of the dreadful "other", and the divergence of the faith communities. And finally, there was the Partition of India in 1947 which appeared to confirm the primacy of faith as the very basis of personal and national identity.

Nonetheless, its journey in independent Bangladesh began in some optimism and apparent clarity. The constitution of 1972 unambiguously accepted secularism as one of the four foundational pillars of the State. This was entirely expected. This followed the logic of linguistic/cultural nationalism that had challenged the earlier Pakistani formulation, as well as the defeat of the Pakistani military which had pursued an overtly religious agenda. They lost. While the other pillars, such as democracy and socialism, were going to entail further negotiations and struggles, this issue, it was felt, had been settled. That confidence was seemingly misplaced.

Secularism was not killed with Bangabandhu's brutal assassination in 1975, but it was dealt a crippling blow. The subsequent leadership did not pursue this ideal with the courage, commitment or the charismatic authority that he had represented. Religious groups and leaders, who had remained defensive and tentative initially, were allowed and, at times invited, into the political arena, gradually began to assert their presence, eventually emerged as critical players in bargaining-based and alliance-oriented "democratic" arrangements, and steadily pushed back against earlier secular guarantees. Even its location in the constitution became far less settled than had been originally assumed.

In fact, the 5th amendment (1979) removed secularism from the constitution, and the Divine invocation (Bismillah-Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim) was inserted at the beginning. By the 8th amendment (1988), Islam was declared the "State religion". In 2005, the Supreme Court invalidated the 5th amendment (not on the religious question per se, but on the unconstitutionality of the Martial Law that had been promulgated and hence all laws, acts and amendments passed at the time were deemed to have been automatically nullified). In 2011, Part II, Article 8 of the 15th amendment restored secularism as a fundamental principle of State policy, and Article 12, Part II specifically indicated the elimination of communalism, the non-privileging of any religion, or any discrimination based on faith. However, in Article 2A, Part I, Islam was retained as the State religion, and the invocation remained unchanged. Thus, the constitutional position of secularism became a bit murky.

The increasing influence of the religionists was reflected in other areas as well. First, in education, Prof Abul Barkat reported that between 1970 and 2008, the number of alia madrasas increased from 2,721 to 14,152, and the number of qawmi madrasas went up correspondingly. By 2015, the government indicated the existence of 13,902 qawmi madrasas (though, largely because of definitional imprecisions, some estimates could be several times higher).

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3