

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'They cannot touch Jamaat if only the corrupt are their target'

Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mojahid, is the secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. He became the Ameer of the party's Dhaka City unit in 1983, assistant secretary general in 1988, and secretary general of the party in 2000. He was a minister during the BNP-led four-party alliance tenure in 2001-2006. He is known to have been involved with the acts of genocide committed by the Pakistan military in 1971. Rakib Hasnet Suman and Rashidul Hasan took this interview.

There is a feeling that only Jamaat remained untouched during the military backed caretaker government, what is your comment?

The government says they have caught those who were engaged in corruption. They cannot touch Jamaat if only the corrupt are their target. We had two ministers, and we can challenge that we did not make a single taka through corruption.

But the caretaker government made the mistake of not holding the trials in an open court, and tried to find allegations after arrest. They wanted a balance as no action has been taken against those who supported "reform." The procedure adopted to reduce corruption was wrong.

You held an "unprecedented" meeting with the BNP chairperson in the sub-jail. Who arranged that meeting?

I was in jail during Ayub, Yahya, Ershad and Hasina's regime. It is possible to meet anyone if the jail authority allows it. It was not a meeting but a call. In fact, a free and fair election is our target. The call was organised ahead of the election. She [Khaleda] is our alliance leader and it was necessary to know her view. She also has no objection against me, and we visited her after getting permission

from the jail authority.

Who gave the proposal first for that meeting -- the government or the four-party alliance?

We wanted to, and Delwar Hossain also applied officially. It [meeting with Khaleda in jail] happened on the basis of our desire. I will not tell you anything more in this regard.

Earlier, the High Court awarded bail to Motiur Rahman Nizami but the government did not appeal in time. This time, the court issued an arrest warrant against you but the police said that you were untraceable. How do you explain this?

No, the government has appealed against the bail order of Nizami. And about myself, I think I am innocent. I did not commit any wrong, and that is why I am doing my normal activities.

Secondly, the investigating officer submitted the final report, saying that no documents were found against us. But the ACC did not like it, so they asked for a new charge sheet against us. That is absolute injustice.

But you participated in dialogue with the chief adviser when there was an arrest warrant against you. The court did not impose any restrictions on my activities. In the meantime, it adjourned the Barapukuria coalmine case for three months.

Do you support the view that only parliament should be empowered to impose emergency to ensure democracy?

It has to be said that emergency might be imposed if necessary, but it must be ensured that it is not misused. If people want, a preventive clause should be included in the constitution to prevent emergency from being misused. The next elected parliament can consider the matter. But we are not giving our final opinion on it now. There are a lot of questions about the activities of foreign diplomats and representatives of donor agencies regarding election and political activities? What do you think?

Donor agencies interfered in our internal political affairs to foil the January 22 election. The roles of some of them contributed to the creation of the unwanted situation. We have asked the UN delegation to explain about their letter, issued before the aborted January 22 election, that concerned a peace-keeping mission. We also said that the coming election was our internal matter, and that, in the name of donor partners, nobody should interfere in our internal affairs. People should be aware of this.

What is your evaluation of 1/11? It would be better if it had not

happened. The country has gone backward in the last 20 months. But the parties should be self-critical, and should have respect for each other.

Have you heard about any list of leaders -- that has been given to the two major parties -- who cannot be nominated for the coming polls?

We have, but so far as I know we did not get such a list.

What is the outcome of the recent dialogue between Jamaat-e-Islami and the caretaker government?

We participated in the dialogue and placed our logical and practical demands ahead of the election. It seems that the chief adviser and other advisers have understood our logic and want to hold the December 18 election. So, there was a consensus that the election must be held, and it's a positive sign.

Why are you opposing election under emergency?

We are opposing emergency as all the fundamental rights are suspended and it is not possible to practice the constitutional rights of the citizen. We cannot even hold rallies under emergency.

But the education adviser has already said that emergency will continue, to ensure the security of voters.

It has no logic. If one thinks this way, emergency will have to continue forever. We have seen elections in festive mood in 1991, 1996 and 2001. And our people never engaged in violence centring elections.

The latest city corporation poll was not error-less as many ballot books have been recovered from different places. Even the CEC himself apologised for such errors.

What will be the position of Jamaat if emergency continues during the upcoming election?

The December 18 election is a must for the nation, and I am not thinking negatively that the government will be irresponsible and create obstacles in the holding of the election.

Why are you opposing the revised Representation of People Order?

Some clauses in the amended RPO are in contradiction with the national constitution. We have placed alternative proposals to uphold the constitution -- like scrapping the amended RPO or making changes in some clauses and sub-clauses.

But some initiatives, like party registration, are necessary to bring the political parties under accountability. Do you support it?

It is not a task of the Election Commission. Leaders of political parties will have to be responsible before the people if democracy and parliament exist. We never opposed the registration process in principle.

We asked them [EC] not to do anything that would delay the election, or take the easy way for registration. They amended the RPO in August, but in the meantime they had to make changes twice. The constitution will force them to make more changes.

There is an opinion that the four-party alliance took a stance against registration and RPO due to Jamaat. Is that right?

Those who made this allegation are blindly against Jamaat. Because, primarily, Awami League, BNP and Jamaat took the same stance on registration and RPO.

We have heard that Jamaat took the initiative to bring changes in the party constitution for getting

registered with the EC. What kind of changes you are making?

We have no problem registering with our existing party constitution. We are a dynamic party and have brought changes in our constitution 12 times till now. We are thinking of making the 13th amendment, and a committee led by the secretary general is working on it.

Are you bringing changes to ensure 33% woman representation to fulfil the EC criteria?

The EC has asked the parties to do that by 2020, so it is not necessary to hurry. About 54 women leaders are regularly attending the meetings of the Majlis-e-Shura. But we think this is not a matter to be imposed. No institution, even the EC, has the right to impose it.

What about your preparation for coming poll? Have you prepared the manifesto?

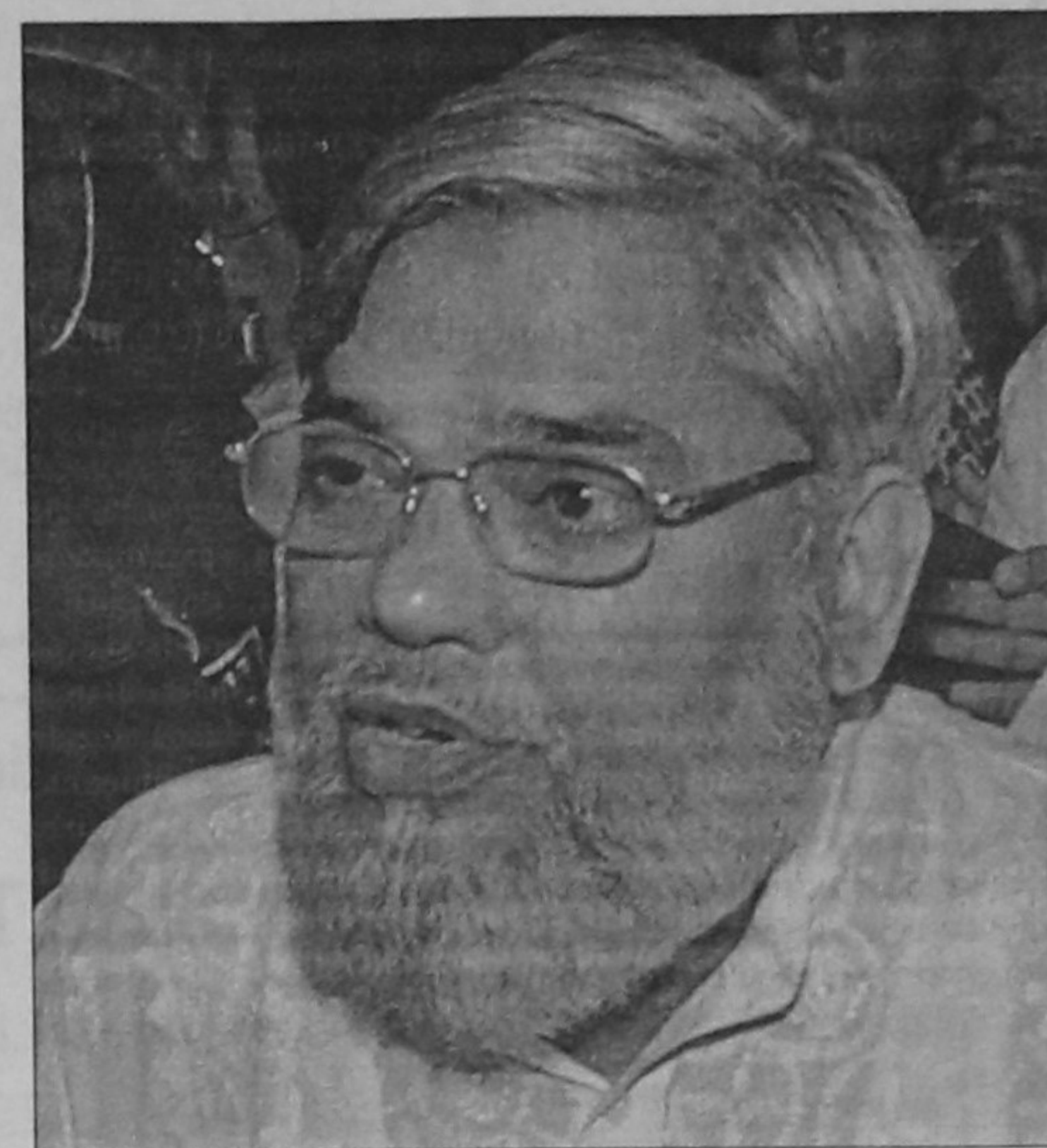
We were ready for January 22, 2007 election, so we are ready to take part in the polls anytime. But we will upgrade our manifesto if necessary, and we are making preparations for that.

When will the processes of seat sharing in the four-party alliance start? How many seats will you want?

We are now trying to understand our position so that no problems arise in reaching a compromise. We got 34/35 seats for the January 22 election, but I will not disclose the number of seats we expect for the coming poll. But we will emphasise on winning.

What will be your party's stance if the question of not giving nomination to the convicted leaders come to the forefront?

We will accept the verdict of the highest court if trials in all stages are held in an open court. The constitution says that a convicted



Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mojahid

person can take part in election if he has filed an appeal petition in the highest court.

But emergency rules say that a convicted person will not be allowed to participate in the poll. This is injustice, and interference in the constitution. A crime like corruption cannot be removed by injustice. There are a lot of allegations of corruption against the BNP-led alliance government. Do you think the image of that government was tarnished due to Hawa Bhaban?

All, including Awami League, had alleged that Ershad had nationalised corruption. Later, corruption allegation rose against the BNP and Awami League governments. The allegation and counter-allegation are going on. But the reality is that corruption has spread out everywhere in the world and it has eaten

all in our country.

We must be corruption free, but it is not possible by creating a flood of cases. It needs an elected government, motivation, changes in test curriculum, and positive role of media and fear of the Almighty. But three elected governments ruled the country, so why has corruption grown?

We just talk about this, but could not take effective measures to eliminate corruption.

Will the BNP-led alliance continue the ongoing anti-corruption drive if voted to power again?

We tried when we were in power. Even 6/7 ministers had been dropped because of corruption. I think the current anti-corruption drive has failed. So I can assure you that we will take tough steps against corruption in future.

The price women leaders pay

Women everywhere in the world have to go one step further to prove that they are equally excellent for carrying out a job. Muslim women have additional burdens. They have to prove their worth as women, as Muslim women, and as Muslim non-Western/brown women.

BINA D'COSTA

IS the global media completely oblivious to the gendered semantics of the recent Bangladeshi political events? News article after news article, from one country's press to the other, is repeating titles such as "battling begums," "feuding begums," and "battered begums." For brevity, I will keep this list short. But start with the Economist articles such as *Politics in Bangladesh: The begums are back* (September 20), *One Begum down* (March 10, 2007), *Battered Begums* (April 14, 2007).

Then glance at the other headlines, such as AFP: *Bangladeshi government wants feuding 'begums' to meet* (September 15), *Arab News: Dhaka seeks talks between 'Battling Begums'* (September 14), *The Daily Times: Battling Begums* (September 11), *Bangladesh's 'Battling Begums' rule the roost again*, Reuters India (September 25), *The Australian: Close Up- Battle of the Begums* (April 28, 2007). Bangladeshi newspapers have their own share of gendered language. Look at S.I. Zaman's piece in *The Daily Star* on October 8.

Do not get me wrong. I am all for political satire and ridiculing, and enjoy the most recent addition to these, i.e. Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin. This kind of ridiculing has a subversive element to it, and is used in witty/innovative ways even in many non-democratic and authoritarian states.

However, ridiculing Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia as begums does not highlight their political failings but rather their gender.

At a time when women's rights and voices are celebrated and thought to be integrated in the political and social lives of both Western and non-Western states, such headlines make me wonder how far we have come in reality?

In contrast to the "hard and stern" Hillary Clinton and Madeline Albright and the "iron lady" image of Margaret Thatcher, the winking Sarah Palin, glorified

as a sex object in the recent US election campaign, perhaps appeals to some women and men.

On the other hand, when we read about battling or battered "begums" of Bangladesh, a poverty stricken largely Muslim nation, one could very well imagine Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Begum Khaleda Zia involved in scuffle, tearing each other's hair, and glaring at each other.

As "begums," both are portrayed as emotive women controlled by hormonal changes, who refuse to talk to each other; women who are not experienced in running the state, and should go back to the kitchen!

Women everywhere in the world have to go one step further to prove that they are equally excellent for carrying out a job. Muslim women have additional burdens. They have to prove their worth as women, as Muslim women, and as Muslim non-Western/brown women.

The global media vividly depict how four wives of one man fight each other for his attention in Afghanistan (for example, *Hot Docs: Four Wives, One Man*, SBS Australia, September 29) and how women suffer the worst fate of honour killings by their relatives in Pakistan (*The Guardian*, September 1).

These bring attention to violence against women in the name of culture, religion and traditions, raise public awareness, and highlight that women's concerns must be urgently addressed.

However, if not understood sufficiently and in context, there is a danger of stereotyped assumption that Muslim women are weak and powerless; women who fight with each other within their private space because they are terrified of the men who rule the public domain.

In a paradoxical manner, Muslim nations have seen important women leaders emerge. Critics would point out that for most of them, family connections were the key to their leadership functions. I will come back to this

point later.

The origin of the word "begum" is Turkish (Begüm), meaning princess or a woman of high rank. Although, in the Indian subcontinent, begum is used as a title of Muslim women of higher rank, it is not uncommon for many other Muslim women to have begum as a title or even a name.

However, the way these articles apply the word "begum" implicitly derides not Sheikh Hasina's and Khaleda Zia's politics but their gender. This is what I object to.

Both have been blamed for contributing to Bangladesh's dark political reality and rightly so, as the leaders were responsible for the domestic instability in Bangladesh. Both came into power through the web of familial connections, which is common not only in politics but virtually in every significant aspect of economic and social stratifications in South Asia.

It is not their gender but their political histories that form the basis of the politics of antagonism between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia.

It is not their gender, but their family connections that provided them with the opportunity to be involved in politics. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia's ascendancy into politics because of family background is not that uncommon in global politics.

The Clintons or the Kennedys, the Senanayakes and the Bandaranaiques in Sri Lanka, Nehru-Gandhis in India, and Bhuttos in Pakistan are some examples of dynastic succession. Benazir Bhutto's autobiography, *Daughter of Destiny*, perhaps best portrays what family connections mean in South Asia.

Children and spouses of political leaders believe they have "moral authority" and are destined to be leaders as well. In many ways, public opinion/support also contributes to this belief of hereditary leadership. If a political leader is assassinated, often another family member bears the responsibility



A little respect, please!

of completing the unfinished task of leading the people or the state.

The most recent example of this is Asif Ali Zardari and his young son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who are jointly leading PPP till Bilawal becomes an adult. Zardari, who used to be called "Mr. Ten Percent," is now the president of Pakistan. He bears an uncanny resemblance to Tariq Rahman in Bangladesh. Or is it my imagination?

With the exception of Indira Gandhi, none of the other political leaders, who appeared on the public stage through family influence in South Asia have been suitably mentored to be leaders. Massive public sympathy following political assassinations and strategic choices of the other leaders in their political parties have landed most of them in leadership roles.

This is something we really need to consider. Political maneuvers in relation to important leadership decisions surrounding the prime ministers and presidents of South Asia are often overlooked. The ridiculing of women in leadership roles does not do women or men any favours.

Sexism and discriminatory practices against women do not stop by allowing women to vote, participate in elections, and voice their opinions.

Men and women journalists, academics and practitioners all have a responsibility to consciously use gender sensitive language, as their outputs have significant impact in shaping norms and practices. Also, ridiculing Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia as "begums" does not necessarily translate into pointing out their

failure as leaders.

In a twisted way, familial connection has served as an opportunity to access political power for both men and women in Bangladesh. Family connections are important, not only in politics but in every aspect of economic and social life here. Who knows whom, and who is connected to who often determine who gets where. It is important to consider reforms in the society that will allow someone without any connection to show her or his potential.

However, ethnic and religious minorities, people living in rural or remote areas, children who do not attend English schools or the best Bangla schools, must be given opportunities that allow them to have access equally.

Neither AL nor BNP regimes have consciously improved the condition of marginalised people in Bangladesh. Benefits have trickled down in the name of the poor, but they have never actually been the primary beneficiaries.

Women in politics are often viewed as weak actors; Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia were no exceptions. The leaders and cronies surrounding them manipulated their naiveté in the earlier days of their role in politics.

Over time, both had perhaps become savvy in terms of Bangladesh's political culture, and both AL and BNP led regimes had made choices that plunged Bangladesh into various political crises. However, it is not their gender that is to be blamed for these recent crises.

Bina D'Costa writes from the Australian National University.

All the king's men

The political identity of Bangladesh is changing fast. If the caretaker government does indeed want to root out corruption and restore its identity as a moderate Muslim country, giving in to the demands of the hard-liners must stop immediately. That can only start with the restoring of the baul sculptures to where they belong.

HANA SHAMS AHMED

"What caste were you when you came to mother earth?"

And what caste did you 'wear' thereafter?

What would be your caste when you depart this world?

Think about it.

And give me an answer."

- From the hymn 'Jaat gelo jaat

gelo boley'

Attributed to be the work of

Fakir Lal Shah

FIRST it was "fugitive"

Jamaat-e-Islami

Secretary General Ali

Ahsan Mohammad Mojahid

who went "missing" from the

law-enforcers net only to be

seen by rest of the country at a

high-profile meeting with none

other than the chief adviser of

the caretaker government.

Then, the government worked

with amazing speed at the

complaint of the bigots and

ordered the airport and civil

aviation authorities to take

down the sculptures of the

bauls. 50 lakh takas had already

been spent on it.

This is the same government,

by the way, which has been paying

lip service to the cause of the

trial of the war criminals. Even

after several appeals by the

Sector Commanders Forum and

other groups to initiate the

process of the trial, this

government has chosen to

look the other way. This is

also the same government

which has been sitting on the

draft policy against sexual

harassment, just like all other

previous governments, and

expressing shyness about

taking a decision about it.

But given how much

resistance and intimidation

were faced by the government

after implementing the

[watered down] National Policy on

Advancement of Women, this dilly-dallying does not come as much of a surprise.

The latest incident seems to have been incited by none other than the Islamic Oikya Jote chairperson Fazlul Huq Amini who "announced" that "all sculptures in the country should be razed to the ground." Amini is the same person who carried out a violent and hate-filled campaign against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in 2004-05. He is also the person behind the furious protest against the women's policy, proclaiming a fatwa that by announcing the policy, the caretaker government has spoken against the Quran. Amini also said in a press statement that if ever an Islamic party came to power in Bangladesh it would ban Grameen Bank from operating in the country, calling Nobel laureate Yunus, an "enemy of Islam." So the government has basically given in to a demand of a group which is essentially anti-secularism, anti-women's empowerment, and anti-empowerment of the poor!

And the giving in to this demand seems to be spreading across the country like a virus. Already a statement signed by 101 leaders of various Islamic groups has demanded that the construction of a sculpture named Bijay Bihanga, or the bird of victory being set up in Barsial marking the liberation of the city from the Pakistani forces in 1971, should be immediately stopped. The work had been 'approved' by religious leaders earlier.

At one time Bangladesh was termed as a moderate Muslim country. The majority Muslims could live peacefully with people of other faiths -- the second largest followers of the faith, the Hindus along with Christians,

Buddhists and other minorities. Although inter-faith marriages were culturally been frowned upon, religion induced clashes were unheard of. And then the bombs went off at the Pahela Boishakh celebrations in 2001, which proved to be a turning point in changing the country's identity of "moderate Muslim."

But how did Amini and many like him get to this position of power? After Ershad's fall in 1991 the Bangladeshi public were only too happy to see BNP and AL either in power or as the opposition in the parliament. After nine years of dictatorship rule, what more could the people ask for?

The first blow came when BNP decided that forming a coalition with Jamaat, many of whose leaders are known collaborators of the Pakistan army, would give them the political edge they needed to stay in parliament.

The second blow came when Awami League, who boasted of being secular, too, in nature, decided it, left, would form a coalition with Khelafat Majlis. That coalition never worked out, but the damage had been done. When the two major political parties have shown their insecurities in front of extremist groups, expecting a caretaker government to take a stand against the hard-liners would be too much to expect. Or would it?

The political identity of Bangladesh is changing fast. If the caretaker government does indeed want to root out corruption and restore its identity as a moderate Muslim country, giving in to the demands of the hard-liners must stop immediately. That can only start with the restoring of the baul sculptures to where they belong.

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