

The Bumps and Grinds on Our Journey to Secularism

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY stresses on the importance of secularism in our Constitution as well as in our national consciousness.

"My people are going to learn the principles of democracy, the dictates of truth and the teachings of science. Superstition must go. Let them worship as they will, every man can follow his own conscience provided it does not interfere with sane reason or bid him act against the liberty of his fellow men." -Mustafa Kemal Ataturk

I am quoting Kemal Ataturk, father of modern Turkey, above with a purpose. Some five decades after Ataturk launched his rebuilt country on a secular path, Bangladesh would be the second Muslim country in the world that would enshrine secularism in its Constitution. It was a heroic leap for a war-ravaged small country that was until independence a part of a country that blazoned religion boldly in its Constitution. However, the secular Constitution that Bangladesh gave to its people in 1972 and to the world at large was not a reaction to the vile manipulation of religion by our former rulers. Nor was it an angry response to suppression of our freedom movement or killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people in the name of religion. Our secular principle and the ban on forming political associations based on any religion in our first Constitution had only one objective. The founders of our Constitution wanted to guarantee that we do not have a repeat of the murderous acts of a band of zealots who took cover of religion to terrorise every nook and corner of our country running their "holy war" for nine months. This was done because our leaders believed such heinous acts and bigotry could be prevented only by steering the country towards a secular path. This was done because they believed that secularity of the Constitution is an important aid to support a country's claim of protecting of human rights that span all religious beliefs.

Following the great examples of other truly democratic nations, founders of fledgling Bangladesh incorporated secularism as one of the four state principles. True, the Bangladesh Constitution of 1972 defined secularism as religious neutrality (*dharmo niropekkhota*), which is not quite the same as its classical definition (indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations). Still, one could say proudly that secularism