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Ideological Struggles Within

May 21 is World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development. In this week's In Focus, we explore some of the issues threatening the cultural pluralism of Bangladesh.

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If you're one of the somewhat-politically-conscious individuals who bother to gloss over lengthy op-eds (and not just the trending news of the day) you will have noticed the term "cultural diversity" thrown around quite a lot in recent times. You will have seen oft-repeated phrases about cultural pluralism and religious tolerance that either paint a wholly rosy picture of present day Bangladesh (almost always politicians) or decry the threats that our cultural fabric is under (almost always journalists and columnists).

For an independent observer (if there is such a thing), the reality would

Now, when a Hindu home is burnt down in Brahmanbaria, or Santals' houses are set aflame in Gaibandha, it seems eerily familiar to the time when West Pakistan acted on its violent, undemocratic ambitions to "Islamise" and "purify" Bengali culture in East Pakistan.

Maybe history does repeat itself. Now, when demands for the removal of the statue of Lady Justice by far-right groups are appeased and legitimised to score political points there is a very real sense of capitulation to this dangerous yet growing movement that seems to despise any kind of diversity. The questionable changes of textbooks distributed for free at the beginning of this year—not to mention the curious timing of these changes—had long been demanded by Hefazat. In this dizzying game of political maneuvering, those who still believe that the basic tenet of secularism enshrined in the Constitution means something, are the ultimate losers. The truth is that Hefazat and the like can no longer be seen as "fringe" elements. They now have enough power to make demands centre stage and rally mainstream political support.

By now, we should know better than to live inside our liberal bubble where proponents of the far-right (although they may not self-identify as such) seem to constitute an "insignificant, negligible minority". The truth is far from it. If social media is taken at face value and considered a reliable barometer to gauge public opinion, you'd be awestruck by the sheer number of advocates of the group's demands.

"We don't believe in a Greek goddess do we? Besides it [has] got nothing to do with Bangladesh in any way or the other," wrote a reader on *The Daily Star's* Facebook news post. "It should be removed forever," reads another comment. Skimming through like-minded comments, you'll notice that the people with these views don't fit into any one particular demography; they come in all shapes and sizes - from rural madrasah-educated men to the so-called urban elite.

But let's give credit where it's due. Hefazat has been hugely successful in mobilising support in its strongholds in the rural pockets whereas the urban middle—too busy fighting social media wars—has failed to even politically organise. Years and years of politi-

cal turbulence, unbridled corruption, subpar education system, deepening inequality have accelerated the rise of a disillusioned, youthful population who account for a large chunk of Hefazat's bastion of support.

There is a widely held belief that culture and religion are mutually exclusive entities. And herein lies the primary source of conflict. This is how ethnic minorities different from us both in terms of culture and religion—and who generally occupy the lower rungs of society—are further ostracised.

It has been forty-six years since

that has come up over and over again is Samuel P Huntington. One of the most renowned and controversial political theorists of modern times, Huntington is best known for his seminal essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. In it he argues that conflicts in the post-Cold War world would arise not due to a clash between countries or ideologies but between civilisations defined by cultures. (He later went on to publish his most famous book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* in 1996.) He predicted that the most likely conflicts would be between the West and China or Islam because he thought democracy to be "incompatible" with the last two.

His essay went on to become hugely influential and set off a thunderous debate among international relations theorists. Just as Huntington has been described as prescient and wise so has he been ridiculed for the simplicity of his prognosis.

So, why am I talking about Huntington?

First, the fact that an Episcopalian American political scientist's understanding of the future of world conflicts is not much different from the modern breed of religious extremists is intriguing to say the least. Second, a revived interest in Huntington's famous hypothesis has led many to wonder, was he right? (No, he wasn't.) Third, and most importantly, Huntington makes for an unlikely ally of religious groups like Hefazat.

There are striking similarities between the underlying principles of Huntington's theory of the clash of civilisations and the demands of religious extremists. And it's worth pointing them out.

One, for Huntington, religion's influence in shaping a civilisation trumped that of culture and traditions. In many ways, he further legitimised the rigid dichotomy between culture and religion that fundamentalists so passionately believe in.

Two, for Huntington, there is an inherent incompatibility of democracy with the Islamic world which religious fundamentalists too, are in agreement with. Here, the Arab Spring can be cited as the most recent example that may help to dispel this myth of the "clash of civilisations". Uprisings throughout the Arab world saw demo-

cratic forces overcoming fundamentalist factions and the fall of dictatorial regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Not to mention that this view also lends credence to the idea that democracy is the monopoly of the west.

And finally, like Huntington, religious extremists view the world through the lens of us-versus-the-west. What we are witnessing in many parts of the world now is less a "clash of civilisations" than a clash *within* civilisations. There is enough sectarian violence going on in the Muslim world to disprove this theory once again. Bangladesh is no exception to this notion of intra-civilisational conflict, especially given what's going on now, which answers my previous question—"Can Bangladesh overcome its internal ideological struggle?"

Cultural diversity is not merely the number of cultures existing side by side but also the range of ideas, beliefs and traditions transmitted and reinforced by cultural groups. Cultural diversity is about whether or not there is equal space for all cultural identities to express themselves. It's the linguistic, artistic, religious diversity that once made Bangladesh a repository of cultural diversity.

A major reason behind the increasing homogeneity, linguistically speaking, is purely economic. It is the shrinking space for free cultural expression that is worrying. When the houses of worship of religious minorities are destroyed and vandalised by mobs in broad daylight and their homes attacked and looted, the message is clear.

Now is the time to organise and mobilise, when the ideological battle lines are being drawn, to mount opposition to undemocratic forces that only seem to get stronger by the day with the help of political elites. We (read: politicians and the media) need to go beyond patting ourselves on the back for protecting cultural pluralism—when we clearly have not—in self-congratulatory political speeches and hollow op-eds. We need to recognise and speak out in every way we can against the false culture-vs-religion dichotomy that already seems to have a stranglehold over the country's secular identity and democratic wellbeing.

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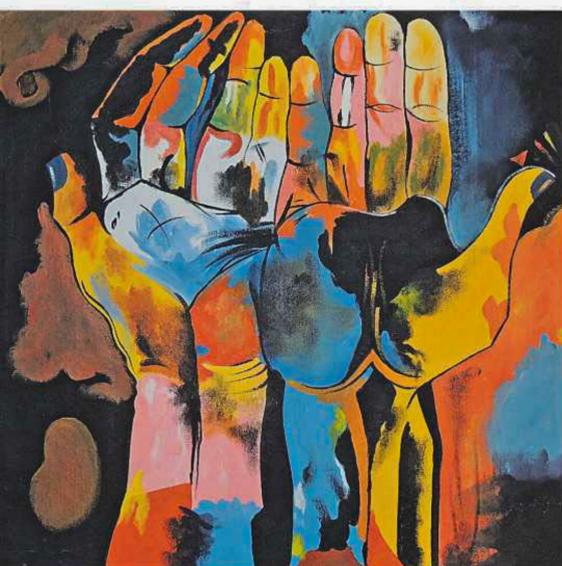


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seem unsettlingly closer to the latter scenario. More recently, even the Lady Justice statue, Mongol Shobhajatra, and the textbook fiasco have turned into battlegrounds for cultural and religious freedom.

It would seem that if there is any way to be hopeful about the future it is to harp on the glory of liberation (that we somehow keep going back to) when the primacy of (Bengali) culture was recognised and defended by Bengalis en masse. For those of us who feel that cultural diversity in this land is under assault, looking back at the history of our liberation struggle has become a taxing process.

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independence, yet here we are afflicted with ideological wounds left untreated. Can Bangladesh overcome this internal ideological struggle?

9/11 heralded a major paradigm shift in the international system. The collapse of the Twin Towers and the partial destruction of the Pentagon led to destructive foreign policies that obliterated entire nations and killed millions. Terrorism became a global menace. It also became the new buzzword for political opportunists everywhere.

In the post-9/11 world one name